10¢
DIME
ALL STORIES COMPLETE
MARCH
WESTERN
MAGAZINE
GUN-CALL FOR WIND RIVER RIDERS
SMASHING NOVEL OF FRONTIER MONTANA
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THE LEADING WESTERN MAGA
DOUBLE-OR-NOTHING
COWMAN
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# ACCIDENT or SICKNESS

## This Can Happen to You!

**Thousands of people are disabled every hour of the day.** Don't let sickness or accident find you unprepared. Get a "Security" policy. The cost is so low that you cannot afford to be without this protection.

THE SECURITY POLICY

# 'S YOUR EXPENSES

The "Security" Accident and Sickness Policy will protect you, and give your family quick cash money to pay the bills when your income is stopped. Think of it—**cash money when you need it most!** This remarkable policy pays CASH protection of $25.00 a week up to one full year for accident—$25.00 each week up to ten weeks for sickness—and cash protection up to $3,750.00 for accidental death, loss of hands, eyes or feet. Also other liberal features. All this for only $1.00 a month! You cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to examine this new Security Policy on our 10-day Free Inspection Offer!

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**75 East Wacker Drive, Chicago, Ill.**

Please send me complete information at once and tell me how I may get the "Security" Policy for 10 Day Free Inspection without obligation. **No agent will call.** I am to be the sole judge.

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City..... State.....

# IF MOTOR WASTES OIL SEND FOR *Free* SAMPLE!

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## SAVES OIL SAVES GAS

Nearly a million motorists have test this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated. *Let us prove it to you at no risk.*

If worn rings and cylinder ing oil and gas, wonders can your motor. Wonders of cutti gas waste—(savings up to 50% re ed)—of new power, pep and quiet out the expense of new rings and r Ovrhaul can be the secret of b ings to you.

## USED IN PLACE OF RINGS AND REBO

Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested an in leading industrial laboratories—the m cal engineering departments of a State Univer- sity—and an outstanding School of Technology as well as nearly a million motorists.

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Ovrhaul is quickly installed through spark plug openings—no special tools—no car tie-up. Works in while you drive and is as harmless to use as oil. Single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

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**FOR SALESMEN AND DISTRIBUTORS WHO ACT QUICK!**

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Enclosed please find my order for 72 tubes of Ovrhaul. It will be necessary that you rush the shipment immediately because it seems to sell as fast as we can get it.

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I have put between seventy-five and one hundred tubes of Ovrhaul in old cars and I have not yet had a complaint.

I have been a mechanic for many years and Ovrhaul is the only product I have ever recommended to car owners for the purpose of decreasing oil and gas waste caused by worn cylinders and rings.

Every time I use Ovrhaul in a motor, the compression is greatly increased, the pep and power is helped, the motor is made quieter, and the gas and oil used is considerably reduced.

Yours very truly,
(Signed) J. L. (Jack) Reeves.

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Without cost or obligation, rush me FREE SAMPLE. ALSO show me your big money-making plan.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

Name and Year of Car_____

# 10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOLUME XXIII MARCH, 1939 NUMBER 3

### Complete Western Novel

**Gun-Call for Wind River Riders**.....Walt Coburn 13
*Dick Smith, cowboy fugitive, rode death's dark trail when he obeyed the summons of his murdered cowmen neighbors.... For he must buy with his own blood his last chance to fight again a war which was forever lost....*

### Three Complete Western Novelettes

**Double-Or-Nothing Cowman**.....Harry F. Olmsted 54
*A discouraged poverty rancher, young Vic Walton found the remedy for his heartbreaking tragedy in a course that had led many an honest youngster to destruction: A quick ... a fast horse—and to hell with all men!*

**...ge-Hogs Savvy Gun-Talk!**.....Stone Cody 82
*...lance his father's peace-loving nature, young Phil Burchard answered a range-hog's argument in bullets—from the gun that must bring ruin to the range he loved!*

**... Neighbors Hunt a Cowman**.....Cliff Farrell 106
*...cowman, forever a cowman," was the first commandment Buck Coldiron had ... But his own bitter neighbors and a renegade sheepers' crew swore to change ...ngster's sacred creed.*

### Three Western Short Stories

**...d for Blood—and Hot Lead!**.....Lloyd Eric Reeve 45
*Loving Rita Pope above all else, must Jeff Ware condemn both her and her rancher dad to ruin...?*

**All Strangers Must Die!**.....Tom Roan 72
*Looking down at the dead cowboy, Dave Deeth found he was staring into his own sudden grave!*

**Tensleep's Tenderfoot Partner**.....Bart Cassidy 97
*That stolen Muleshoe herd meant two hundred needed dollars to Tensleep Maxon, but to the tenderfoot it meant a rope for Tensleep's neck!*

—And—

**Guidepost to the Frontier**.....The Editors 4
*Not all frontiersmen wore buckskin....*

**Two Badmen from Yuma**.....Trail Rider 11
*Two convicts, Ute and Feder, had just six months to find and kill their desert-rat ex-partner, before they themselves must die!*

**In the Saddle**.....A Department 120

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

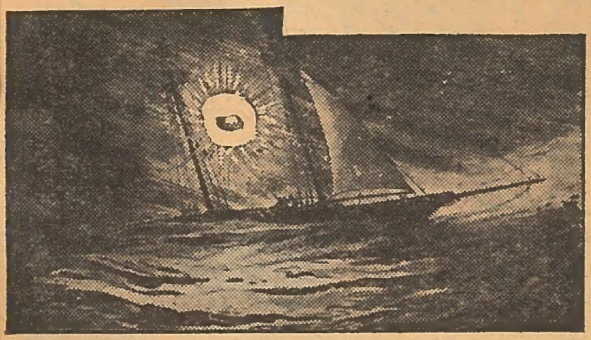
*THE WORLD'S LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE*

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 30, 1935, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1939 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.20. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped, self-addressed envelopes for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.
Printed in U. S. A.

# IF I FAILED...WE WERE ALL DEAD MEN

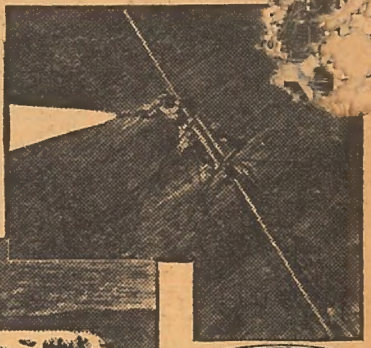
**LASHED TO SHROUDS OF SINKING, BURNING SCHOONER, SAILORS SEE HOPE OF RESCUE FADE**

**1** "The dream of my life, for which I had saved since I first went to sea at twelve, had come true!" writes Capt. Hans Milton of 610 West 111th St., New York City. "I was making my first voyage as master and owner of my own vessel, the two-masted topsail schooner 'Pioneer,' when the hurricane of last September caught us 400 miles off Nantucket.



**2** "We were pumping to keep afloat when we passed into the windless vortex of the storm where the waves were leaping and jumping crazily and where they crashed in our companion ways and filled the ship beyond hope of saving her. The five of us and the cat scrambled aloft for our lives. Our deck-load of lumber kept us afloat and without fresh water and with almost no food we lived, lashed to the rigging, for three endless days and nights.

**3** "Once a steamer hove in sight—but failing to see our distress signals, went her way. At 3 a.m. on the fourth morning steamer lights showed momentarily over the wild sea. We rigged a huge ball of sails and [illegible] kets, soaked it with gasoline, touche[illegible] and hoisted it aloft.



**4** "But the steamer did not change her course. She thought we were fishing. The wind blew burning fragments back on the ship setting her afire in various places. I could see the stern light of the steamer going away from us. *If I couldn't stop her, we were all dead men!* I climbed to the fore-top and in desperation pulled my flashlight from my back pocket and in Morse code signalled 'Sinking... S O S... Help!'

**5** "Slowly, I saw the ship turn! In her last hour afloat, all of us and the cat were saved from the sinking, burning 'Pioneer' by those fine seamen of the United States Liner 'American Banker' and by the power of two tiny 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries that stood by us in the blackest hour of our lives!

(*Signed*) *Captain Hans Milton*"

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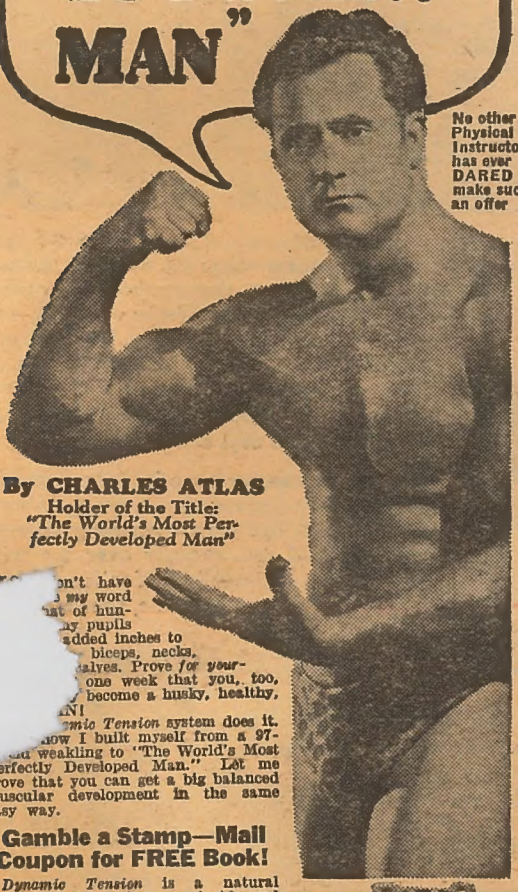

No other Physical Instructor has ever DARED make such an offer

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[illegible]on't have [illegible] my word [illegible]at of hun- [illegible]y pupils [illegible]added inches to [illegible] biceps, necks, [illegible]alves. Prove *for your-* [illegible] one week that you, too, [illegible] become a husky, healthy, [illegible]AN!

[illegible]*mic Tension* system does it. [illegible]now I built myself from a 97- [illegible]d weakling to "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Let me prove that you can get a big balanced muscular development in the same easy way.

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Gamble a stamp today. Mail coupon for a free copy of my new illustrated book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique.

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This valuable cup stands about 14" high on a black mahogany base.
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Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

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City..... State.....


# GUIDEPOST TO THE FRONTIER

**Men . . . have found a use for this wild land. . . .**

FROM time to time we have read articles which perennially noted the "passing of the last frontier." Sometimes they'd be illustrated with pictures of an automobile load of tourists in some hitherto remote place, an airplane, some building construction going on in formerly deep wilderness. Yet somehow those never filled our eyes with tears of sentimental regret, because there were still plenty of localities where almost any man could get lost easily, or wander half starving and miserable until he either died or proved himself sufficiently ingenious and stubborn to carve out an existance.

A few weeks ago we read another article on the same subject. It mentioned that a project of mapping the territory West of the Colorado River in Southern Utah, begun fourteen years ago, was far from completed. It's a wild, tough land, gents, just as it was in the beginning, and it looks as if it ever shall be. But it isn't anything to pioneer, because the few water holes are already owned by one man, and it's so up-and-down and unfertile that even the Indians don't care for it. Yet it's interesting to note that men have found a use for at least a part of the wild

*(Continued on page 6)*

# Boys! Girls! Bikes for All GIVEN

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SEND NAME
MAIL COUPON!

Everybody can get premiums or Cash. BIKE or other expensive Premiums YOURS for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE big colored pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE for CHAPS, CUTS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as explained in catalog sent with goods. SPECIAL:—Or choose one of 20 Premiums for returning only $3 collected. Constant users—please write. Millions pleased. Pictures pep sales. Salve sold most calls. BE FIRST. Mail coupon Now! Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Dept. PP-91, Tyrone, Pa.

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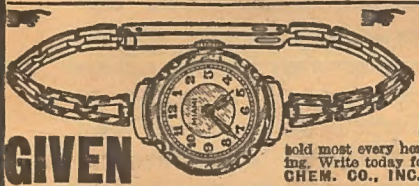
Headlight; Horn; Tool Box; Coaster brake. Yes, fully equipped. Chromium plated parts. What a Bike! A brand new sporty bike for ambitious boys and girls!



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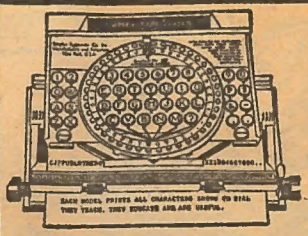

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Or Big Cash Commission—Send No Money— Send Name and Address. Nothing to Buy!

Every letter in the alphabet and the numerals from 1 to 10. Any child can write on it after two hours practice and older people will grasp the idea at once. Full directions, extra supply of best quality copying ink. Clever! Practical! Given for simply giving away free beautifully colored art pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for chaps, burns, etc., which you easily sell to your friends and relatives at 25c a box (with picture free) and paying as explained in catalog. Be first. Customers waiting. Write quick. Mail coupon now. WILSON CHEMICAL CO., INC., DEPT. PP-91, TYRONE, PA.

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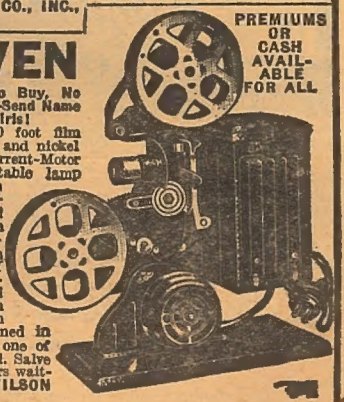
ELECTRIC PROJECTOR — 200 foot film capacity—all steel, wrinkle finish and nickel trim. 110 volt motor. AC Current-Motor rewind. Tilting device. Adjustable lamp socket. Special bulb, built in condenser. Shows good size picture. It's a whiz. LADIES! GIRLS! Charming Wrist Watch about size of dime—Dainty—Attractive—Beautiful EITHER Movie or Watch YOURS for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE beautiful pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for CHAPS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. SPECIAL: Or choose one of 20 premiums for returning only $3 collected. Salve sold most every home. Millions pleased. BE FIRST. Customers waiting. Write today for salve and pictures sent postage paid. WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. PP-91, TYRONE, PA.



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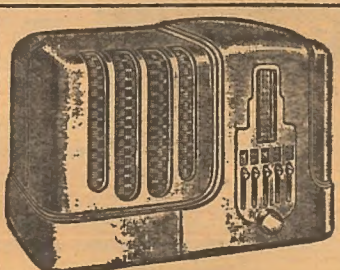
**Full Size**

**Nothing To Buy**



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Name .....

RD..... Bx..... St.....

Town..... State.....

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Write at once for Special Introductory Low Price Offer. Try 3 in 1 Electric Torch for 10 days at our risk, or get one free by helping to introduce it. ELECTRO-TORCH CO., 2613-C Michigan Ave., Chicago

*(Continued from page 4)*

area, among them Butch Cassidy, who used Robbers' Roost as a hide-out. Within the pages of these stories you'll often find description not only of Robbers' Roost and other similar hideouts, but of that country in general.

Undoubtedly, the Roost would still furnish sanctuary of a sort to men who have found themselves on the wrong side of the law, but it's doubtful if such a remote and barren refuge would hold much appeal to the less hardened and, perhaps less decent, breed of criminal. It's too easy to starve there without working, and one of the differences of the modern outlaw against the equally wrong but greater men of Cassidy's type is that the former seem allergic to any kind of honest effort.

It has long been our belief that the frontier, in its larger sense, is not so much a place as a state of mind. It's new land, a new field of work, any place or any territory which only men may enter who have the power to see ahead and the courage to fight for against heart breaking odds. That takes in, you'll agree, quite a lot of vista.

To be sure, it may have been the first cattleman who drove his herd up unmarked trails when Texas ranges were so overstocked that it was impossible there to make the grade as a cowman. It may have been those first men who became mad with joy when they found gold at Sutters' Mill or uncovered the wealth of the Comstock Lode. But there again, in the seething gold frontier we must watch our step in calling anyone a real frontiersman.

Certainly they were not the traders, the men who only came upon rich mineral deposits by a stroke of sheer luck, then sold and got out, to live the rest of their days in luxury. Rather, we like to think of them as the men who worked the

*(Continued on page 8)*

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*(Continued from page 6)*

mines, who withstood the savage battles against drouth, blizzard and sickness, but who never deviated from the course they'd set for themselves—to win either glory or riches, despite the cast of Fate.

Surely, the cold-deck tinhorns, crooks, killers, or any of the pack of human wolves who preyed upon their own kind could never be called frontiersman in the true sense of the word. They were not the builders, the producers, nor did they have the courage or determination to explore the fields where none had ever before set foot. In the turbulent life of the California camps, one of the first men to rig up his own crude placer outfit wrote to "the States": "A year ago, any of the boys could leave his claim and his poke unguarded, but now with the coming of thousands of other eager gold-seekers, three good men have been killed defending the claims which were rightfully theirs. Each claim jumper was given a trial and hanged. . . ."

Those men were never willing to bear the burden of hard and primitive living; they were never willing to take an honest risk of death or ruin. They were among the human tide who rolled in long after the real frontiersman had blazed the trail, had shouted his tiding that, for a man with courage and who had within him the spark of real adventure, there was a new land to be conquered.

There is the old story of the bearded, patriachal leader who had headed his little band of pilgrims into the rich ranges of the Lost Lode Hills, only to be caught in a bitter cattle feud. Perhaps he was a little too devout, but, as he gathered the pitiful remnants of his neighbors about him, he told them that he had had a vision of bringing them at last to wealth and peace.

With a few broken wagons and gaunted cattle, they set out under his leadership. Men, women and children died on the

way, for they had to cross a pitiless alkali sink, and their water and food ran out. By sheer force of will he quelled one revolt, and at last, weakened and their numbers diminished by that man-killing trek, he did find a barren place of refuge on a mountainside.

"There is gold here," he told them, and dug for it with the rest, after they had erected some sort of shelter for the sick and injured. But they found not even paydirt; only backbreaking labor and the weary discouragement of trying to remove the sticky clay from their shovels at every stroke. Half sick, they finally gave up, though their leader cursed and pled with them. At last, alone, he watched them descend the bleak mountainside.

Somehow he stayed out that winter, secure in his faith of his vision. That Spring he made his way with samples of the clay to the nearest assay office, arriving half dead from exposure in the March blizzards. He returned, however, with renewed hope, and set out to find his band of people.

A month later, one of his ex-followers came upon his frozen body. In a buckskin wallet was a scrawled message. It said: "My children, we have been working the richest silver deposit yet discovered. Return to the winter camp; work it; fight for it, for it will take care of you and yours."

He, in one sense was a true frontiersman; a man of mad vision perhaps, but one who was willing to take the derision, the curses and blows of those who lacked his faith in the land to which he led them.

To those men of dauntless courage who followed their dreams—and fought to make them come true, we re-dedicate the frontier dramas which appear each month in this magazine.

—THE EDITORS


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# Two Badmen from Yuma

UTE first saw Lukens' body wedged in a narrow crevasse, high up in the Piñons. And when he and his partner, Feder, had at last roped it up, in a sudden red surge of rage Ute went for his gun.

Feder knocked the six-shooter away. "You fool!" his thin face with the tell-tale spots of crimson looked up from Lukens' form. "You'd shoot away our chance to collect mebbe a hundred thousand dollars. He's still breathin'. We got to get him well enough to talk."

It had begun back in Yuma Prison where Ute and Feder, serving life sentences for killing a bank cashier, had listened to the old desert-rat prospector, Lukens, who had also run afoul of the law. Lukens had boasted of his bonanza strike in the Piñon Mountains.

Shortly after they freed Lukens, the prison medico had given Ute and Feder six months before tuberculosis ended their worthless lives. Then, one night of storm, amid the banshee wail of sirens and the crash of rifles, they had gone over the wall. They had almost four months in which to find Lukens, kill him, and then meet their end in a riotous burst of golden splendor from Lukens' fabulous stake. But now . . .

"We got to get up a temporary shelter," Feder said, ripping tarps and blanket rolls from their horses. "Then we'll locate his claim."

But, during the next few days, as Lukens babbled inanely about his still-hidden riches, the two outlaws could find no trace of the miner's camp. Meanwhile, by slow stages, the temporary shelter assumed the shape of a small cabin. A spring burbled nearby; long since Ute had gone out and shot a deer; other game, too, was plentiful.

A new light came to their eyes, replacing the hard glitter of cruelty and greed. And one time, when Ute was out, Feder stopped suddenly.

"Nugget Canyon," Lukens muttered. "The claim—must get back!"

Feder drew his gun, then hesitated. Ute, Feder knew, would have shot the sick man then and there. But, although he knew he wouldn't have hesitated had he learned the strike's location when he had first seen Luk[illegible] the old miner had become somehow important to him; he was comp[illegible] after a fashion. They'd been through the hell of Yuma together, they'd gotten out alive. . . . Let Ute do it. . . .

Yet, when Ute came in, a grin on his homely face, Feder somehow forgot to mention Nugget Canyon.

It was Ute, late that night after Lukens had gone to sleep, who said, "This is swell country. Mebbe we could make us a strike as rich as Lukens'." Suddenly he gazed straight at Feder. "I got a funny idea that we can make a liar out of that prison medico," he said softly. "I feel like a yearlin'."

The following day, Feder went out, leaving Lukens to be cared for by Ute. When he returned Ute was on his knees beside the cot of spruce boughs, desperately trying to sustain life in the old miner.

And as Lukens died, he drew from beneath the bed a scrawled note. Eagerly they snatched it, their eyes widening as they read:

> When you found me I knew what you was lookin' for. My life depended on my keepin' you fooled about the claim that I'd sold a year ago and gambled away the money. But I thought if you was given a chance to get some of the bitterness out of you, you'd show up as real men. You'll be safe here to make a fresh start. Likely you can find enough gold to grubstake you anyhow—but you'll have to work for it. Good huntin', fellers, an' thanks.

"So he knew all along!" Ute breathed at last. "Did he tell you, too, about this Nugget Canyon?

Feder nodded. "It's worth a try, anyhow." He looked again at Luken's face, so peaceful now. "Mebbe he knew more than that," he said softly. "Mebbe he knew that he was givin' us even more than the gold we thought he had. Like you said, Ute, this is mighty fine country—a country where two men have a chance to blot out a twisted back-trail!"

—TRAIL RIDER

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# GUN-CALL FOR WIND RIVER RIDERS

By WALT COBURN

Dick saw . . . . two men, their faces covered by black masks come out the door. . . .

## Stirring Complete Novel of the Frontier

**Guns of the bitter Johnson County War were stilled at last, though the bones of bushwhacked ranchers still spotted the brush-filled coulees. . . . It was then that Dick Smith obeyed a grim summons from those unmarked graves, and rode a thousand perilous miles to buy with his last life's blood his chance to fight for a cause already lost!**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Last of the Wind River Gang

THE sheriff and his posse followed the escaped prisoner's trail to where it hit the main wagon road that led from Dry Gulch to the Catfish Island Crossing. There, on the bank of the Missouri River, the tracks of the hunted man's horse were confused with other fresh hoof tracks. A bunch of horses had been hazed across this strip of the road and the sheriff pulled up, cussing.

"No use tryin' to pick up his tracks in that." He pointed to the marks of

loose horses. "He's pulled an Injun trick on us. Like as not this young warthog has friends in this part of Montana. They've drifted a bunch of horses acrost here and blotted out his sign."

"It's only ten miles to the saloon at Catfish Island Crossin'," suggested one of the possemen. "Me, I'm dry and I'm hungry. It's forty miles back to Dry Gulch and our horses is leg-weary."

The sheriff nodded and led the way along the wagon road. A few miles farther on found the confusion of horse tracks gone. There were fresh wagon-tracks, but the sheriff studied carefully the marks of horses' hoofs.

"Wagon drawed by a team. Tracks of a third horse in the middle of the road. It just might be. . . ." He rode on ahead, his words trailing behind him.

The sheriff's jaw was set and grim as he scanned the broken badlands country ahead. His temper was sharp edged, and small wonder. Last night when he brought supper to a prisoner he had suspected of being one of the Wind River Gang from Wyoming, that prisoner had shoved a gun in his belly, disarmed him, and locked him in his own jail. Somehow or another the jailbird, who claimed his name was Dick Smith, had procured a six-shooter. He must have had help from the outside.

It had been two hours before anybody had heard the sheriff's shouts from the jail cell and released him. The disgrace of it rankled. All along the trail he had turned over in his mind the many ways he would get even with that young smart Alec cowpuncher who claimed the name of Dick Smith.

Dick Smith is the name given a man who drinks alone. That young whipper-snapper had told the sheriff that he liked the name.

"Because," he had grinned amiably, "I ain't much of a hand at linin' up at a bar and buyin' drinks for a lot of bar-flies and back-slappers. Just put me down on your books as Dick Smith, Sheriff. I hope your grub is better than I had in the last six-eight jails I was in."

That was the man Sheriff Mark Huggins now hoped to overtake. He'd described him to the men who made up his hastily organized posse.

"He ain't tall ner he ain't short. He's tow headed and his eyes is either blue or gray. He grins all the time like he's thinkin' over some job to put up on a man. His name ain't no more Dick Smith than mine is."

"Mark," said one of the weary posse, "just can't take a joke. He's plumb afire inside. You kin light a match by touchin' it to his head."

The sheriff sighted a light democrat wagon ahead. It was a canvas-covered wagon drawn by what is called a spike team of three horses. The horse working in the lead of the span was hooked by a singletree to the end of the wagon tongue.

The three horses were covered from ears to tail by homemade blankets fashioned from burlap sacks to protect them from deerflies and mosquitoes.

THE covered wagon was pulled off to one side of the road. A white-bearded, white-maned old patriarch, in faded overalls and patched flannel shirt, was busy with a brush and a bucket of white paint. Across a big granite boulder he had painted in bold lettering: "Repent, ye sinners!"

He looked up from under the brim of a battered old black hat at the sheriff and his men, then went back to his work.

"Seen anything of a horsebacker, gran'-paw?" asked the sheriff.

The old man cupped one horny, paint-specked hand to his ear. "How's that?" he said, his tone a little sharp with annoyance.

"A tow-headed cowpuncher." Sheriff Mark Huggins raised his voice. "He's an outlaw. You seen anything of him?"

"As ye sow, brother," the old fellow's voice creaked, "So shall ye reap."

He wiped the paint from his hands onto a soiled rag and took a shabby, well thumbed Bible from his pocket. He opened the Bible and his eyes, as blue as the Montana skies, swept the faces of the possemen.

"Here, in the Book of Deuteronomy," the old man's voice rolled sonorously from his bearded lips, "the fifth book of the Pentateuch: so named as containing a second statement of the law of Moses——"

"Hell, let's git goin'," growled the sheriff. "The ol' coot's crack-brained. I had to run the old son of a gun outa town for bein' a nuisance, beggin' and pesterin' folks with his Bible jabberin'. He painted one of them fool signs on my barn. I got to paint the whole barn white, darn his jabberin' hide."

Sheriff Mark Huggins rode on down the road, cussing the white-bearded, self-styled prophet. His men grinned at his back as they followed. That sign on the sheriff's barn had brought the law officer in for a lot of joshing.

The white-bearded old fellow put the cover on his bucket of paint, wiped his brush clean, and climbed back on the seat of his covered wagon. His spike team got under way. The old fellow glanced back into the litter of boxes and camp equipment and blankets and junk that filled the wagon.

"Better stay under cover, son," he said, his blue eyes twinkling, "till they're plumb outa sight. And what did I tell you about smokin' cigarettes back there. If that badge-polisher had shoved his head inside and sniffed that terbaccer smoke, he mighta taken a notion to poke his nose in fu'ther. You're too danged keerless about them things, Dick."

"He wouldn't come in the wagon, Rip, for fear he might git loused up. He sounded peevish, didn't he?"

The old fellow chuckled. "He didn't like the job I done on his barn. You should have heard him cuss. The pearly gates is closed in his homely face forever. They'll be stayin' at the Crossin' tonight, so you can't git acrost. We'll camp at the old cabin at Grouse Springs."

They camped at dusk. Had anybody stopped there they would have found only a white-bearded old religious fanatic who would pester them with Bible reading and fire-and-brimstone lectures until the visitor was only too glad to get out of sight and hearing of the old man.

IT WAS after dark when the young cowpuncher with straw colored hair and laughing blue-gray eyes, took the burlap fly-blanket from the lead horse. Had the blankets been removed from the span of bays, they, like the spike horse, would have been revealed as well-built saddle horses. The cowpuncher dragged saddle, blanket and bridle from under the litter in the wagon. He saddled his horse and shoved a carbine in the saddle scabbard. All this went on in the black shadows while the white-bearded old man puttered around his little campfire.

"You're a locoed young fool to tackle it, Dick," the old man said as he came over to the wagon.

"I've got to get across the river tonight, Rip. Can't fool around on the south side of the Missouri forever. You saw what happened back yonder at Dry Gulch. If you hadn't managed to slip that gun through the window to me, I'd have been in a tight for sure. I'm three days late now. No tellin' what's happened. That big, clumsy sheriff and his men will be either asleep or in the saloon drinkin'. I'm obliged, Rip. You might get asked what become of the lead horse you had hooked to your wagon."

"I'll have a bag full of the right answers to any questions, son. Don't fret about o' Rip Ripley. You done me a good turn and like to got into a mess on ac-

count of bein' ketched thataway in town. Watch your step at the Crossin' tonight. I'll be on the north side of the Missouri in a day or so. You'll know where to locate my camp. I'll mark a few rocks to pilot you. Good luck, Dick."

"And right back at you, Rip. Hope our trails cross before long."

The cowpuncher who had given his name to the sheriff at Dry Gulch as Dick Smith, rode off through the badlands.

The moon was rising when he neared the Catfish Island Crossing. He rode cautiously, his hand on his gun, listening, straining his eyes to catch any suspicious movement along the dark, brush-flanked trail. A light showed in the saloon. He could hear the tipsy voices of men talking and arguing. The river looked silvery in the light of the moon.

He had to pass within a couple of hundred feet of the lighted saloon, and the doors and windows of the building were wide open. Dick Smith could see Sheriff Mark Huggins and half a dozen men standing at the rough pine board bar. The saloonkeeper, a squaw-man named Jase Timberline, was behind the bar. Timberline was a tall Missourian with an unsavory reputation. Law-officers like Mark Huggins were never able to prove any of the crimes the lanky riverman was rumored to have committed—crimes that ranged from horse stealing and giving refuge to outlaws to the graver charges of being a member of outlaw gangs and plain murder. No man ever trusted Jase Timberline, and Timberline, by the same token, put his trust in no man.

SHERIFF MARK HUGGINS might have had a few too many drinks of Jase Timberline's moonshine corn whiskey, because his voice was loud, his manner swaggering. His possemen were more or less tipsy; only Jase Timberline appeared to be sober.

The sheriff was telling them how he was going to grab any member of the Wind River Gang that crossed the Wyoming line into this part of Montana. He was bragging in no uncertain terms how tough he was and how he would do his shooting first and ask his questions afterwards.

Jase Timberline had built his bar so that when he stood behind it dispensing drinks, he faced the front door.

Now, as Dick Smith rode past, his horse traveling at a running walk, he was certain that Timberline sighted him in the moonlight. The lanky-river man had the ears and eyes of an animal. Dick's hand was on his six-shooter.

Now the whiskey-peddler left the sheriff talking to his companions. He slipped out the back door and took a short-cut trail that led to the place where he kept his ferry boat and skiff tied up. There was a six-shooter slug in a holster low on his lanky thigh. In the crook of his left arm he carried a rifle.

Dick Smith had seen the saloonkeeper leave the bar. He spurred his horse to a lope. He swung off the wide wagon trail that led to the ferry, pushing his horse along a twisting, narrow trail. He had his own reasons for not wanting to be halted by Jase Timberline tonight. He stood a good chance of beating him to the river bank and taking the water at a point below the ferry crossing.

A shadowy bulk barred his way. A man barked a harsh but sleepy challenge. "Hold up there!"

Dick Smith spurred his horse toward the man to ride him down or crowd him off the trail. The man's gun roared. A bullet tore past Dick's head.

Almost knocked down by the running horse, the man threw himself off the trail into the brush. Dick reached the river's edge and spurred his horse into the water. As he reached swimming water a gun cracked back on the bank, and bullets sent up little jets of water around the swimming horse.

Dick slid from the saddle and grabbed his horse's tail as several guns went into action back on the bank. But the men were half drunk and they were using six-shooters. The range was too long for a six-shooter. The only bullets that came close were those from Jase Timberline's long barreled rifle.

Jase Timberline was supposed to be a dead shot but now he wasn't shooting to kill his mark. Dick knew that and he called back over his shoulder, "Charge it to Rip, Timberline! Hold your fire!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### No Guns for Hire!

DICK SMITH heard Jase Timberline's harsh, nasal voice yelling, "The Catfish Rapids will drag him under! Might as well save your cartridges. He doesn't stand a chance."

The swift, treacherous current was pulling Dick and his horse downstream. He could hear the crashing rumble of the rapids. The channel between the south shore and the island was narrow, and there was a strip of white water that churned and boiled through jagged rocks. Those whirlpools and undercurrents were powerful enough to suck a horse or man under for keeps.

Dick's horse was a good swimmer, and Dick could handle himself as well or better than the average man in water. But the thundering crash of the rapids dinning in his ears chilled his heart with the dread of being smashed, torn and beaten to death on the rocks below. He'd have to be mighty lucky to pull through.

Then the black bank of Catfish Island loomed ahead. His horse's forefeet were on solid ground and the animal lunged ashore, dragging Dick. The drunken voices back on the south bank faded away. No doubt Timberline had led them back to the saloon to get more of their money for his rotgut whiskey. He'd do a very good business tonight.

While Dick Smith sat on the bank and poured water from his boots, a lazy, drawling voice from the heavy red willow thicket ten feet or so behind him made him give a quick start of surprise.

"Stand up, mister, and see if you kin grab the moon. Don't claw for your gun or your luck will shore change almighty sudden."

There was something deadly behind the lazy tone of that hidden voice behind the dense black curtain of the willows.

"This," said Dick Smith, a mirthless grin on his wet face as he stood erect in the moonlight, hands raised, "is one hell of a note. I make a getaway back yonder. Nary a bullet nicked my hide. I just miss bein' pulled down into the rapids. And now you, whoever you are, pull a trick like this. Is that any way to treat a half drowned man?"

"Nope," came the drawling reply. "It's about as ornery a trick as ever got played, but I got to do it. Toss your gun over here into the brush, mister. Don't be fool enough to try to use it. You're as purty a target as ever a man could want, and I'm in a bad enough tight to shoot if I'm crowded. All I aim to do is borrow your horse. I got to git across to the north shore. My horse drowned last evenin' late, when I tackled the swim you just made. I got ashore here somehow. Kin you swim?"

DICK had tossed his six-shooter into the brush and his temper was getting on edge. "What's that got to do with it?"

"It's got aplenty to do with it. Me, I can't swim a lick. From the island to the north bank is an easy swim. No current to speak of. You kin make 'er easy if you know how to swim at all. When you land on the north bank, travel about two miles down the river. You'll find a line camp that belongs to the Griffin outfit. Nobody livin' there this time of the year. You'll find your horse

in the barn. And some day I hope I kin do you a favor. What's your name, just in case I kin do you a good turn?"

"My name is Dick Smith. Hell of a name, ain't it? But there's no sense in changin' it. You work for the Griffin outfit?"

"That's a dangerous question to ask, mister, either side of the Missouri River."

"And if I asked the name of the man who was settin' me afoot when there's a sheriff posse on my trail, I reckon you'd lie about it?"

"That's smart guessin', mister. If it's Sheriff Mark Huggins from Dry Gulch that's after you, don't fret about him crossin' to the north bank of the river. You couldn't hire him to set foot on Griffin range. Anyhow, they figger you and your horse drowned. Timberline might cross the river tomorrow and come over here to the island from the north side, lookin' for sign. But you'll be a long ways gone by then."

"Providin' I know how to swim," added Dick Smith, looking ruefully at his lack of water soaked tobacco and ruined cigarette papers. "Hell of a low-down trick to play on a man."

"Ain't it, though? Now, Mister Dick Smith, take yourself a little walk down the sandbar. At the far end of it, take to the water. It ain't more than a hundred foot swim. The rest is wadin' water. Want me to take your boots and clothes over on the back of the saddle?"

"That's shore sweet-dispositioned of you, mister," said Dick, "But I'll keep my duds." He started to walk, then halted.

"My gun's in the brush. I need it."

"I'll pick it up and ferry it acrost for you, Dick Smith. You'll find it tied to your saddle."

Dick Smith walked on, whistling softly. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw a tall, shadowy figure emerge from the black shadows. The man groped in the brush and found Dick's gun which he shoved in the waistband of his pants. Then he mounted.

The big bay snorted, whirled and pitched, twisting, sunfishing, grunting each time its slanting legs struck the hard-packed sand. The tall man was thrown heavily, landing on his shoulders.

Before the man could get his wind, recover his dazed wits and get to his feet, Dick Smith was on top of him. His fist crashed into the tall man's jaw twice. The man lay still. Dick Smith got the man's gun and his own six-shooter. Then he swung up into the saddle. He grinned down amiably as the tall man got to his feet and stood, swaying dizzily.

"I plumb forgot to tell you, mister, that War Dance is a one man horse. I shore hate to leave you afoot here on Catfish Island but I got important business on the north side of the Missouri. So-long."

"Hold on a second," said the tall man, rubbing his jaw, "Let's make a dicker. I'll make it worth your while to take a message to that line camp where I promised to leave your horse. There's a man waitin' there for me. Tell him to fetch me a horse that'll pack me acrost the river. I'll give you—"

"I don't charge for doin' a man a favor, mister. I'll take your message. Who do I tell him is playin' Robinson Crusoe on Catfish Island?"

The tall man grinned faintly, hesitating. He tugged thoughtfully at his drooping black moustache. His opaque black eyes studied Dick Smith sharply. Then he nodded as if what he saw about Dick's looks met with his approval.

"Just say it's Long Jim."

"Long Jim Griffin?" Dick Smith supplied the man's last name.

"You win. You'll still deliver the message?"

"Why not?" grinned Dick. "I'm holdin' no grudge."

"That's white of you. You wouldn't

want to hire out to the Griffin outfit? Top wages."

"And a bounty, I've heard, kind of a bonus, for every Marlin man I kin kill. No thanks, mister. When I take part in ary range war it won't be for the fightin' wages either side is payin'. I'll take word to the man that's waitin' at the line-camp. You might need your gun before he gits here."

DICK SMITH tossed back the six-shooter he had taken from the tall man. Long Jim Griffin stooped and picked it up, brushing the sand off the weapon. Dick Smith reined his horse around and rode away.

He crossed the river to the north bank and followed a twisting trail that led down the river. He sighted the log buildings and corrals of the line camp and rode up whistling. His hand was on his gun as a man came out of the barn, a six-shooter in his hand.

"If I come huntin' trouble," Dick called out to him, "I wouldn't be whistlin' like a nightingale, would I?"

"Sounded more like crow to me," said the man. "Who are you, stranger, and what do you want?"

"Long Jim Griffin' is over on Catfish Island. He's afoot and claims he can't swim. He wants you to fetch him a water horse that will pack him home."

"Is he hurt?"

"His jaw," said Dick Smith, "might be a little lumpy. Outside of that he's doin' right well."

"How do I know that this ain't some damn trap set by the Marlin outfit?"

"That's somethin' you'll have to take my word for and run the chances, feller. I rode outa my way to fetch you the message. The rest of it is up to you. And if I got Long Jim Griffin sized up right, you better be rattlin' your hocks. Kin I borrow the loan of a smoke. My makin's is dampish. The ol' Missouri was wet back there in one or two rough spots."

The cowpuncher handed him tobacco and papers. He kept eyeing Dick suspiciously as he led two horses from the barn. Only one was saddled.

"Jim Griffin' lost his saddle along with his horse," said Dick. "Looks like one of you will be ridin' bareback."

"It won't be Long Jim," said the cowpuncher. "You hired out to this outfit?"

"Not yet. What's the shortest cut to the Vickers' ranch from here?"

"The Vickers place?" The cowpuncher, shoving a carbine in his saddle scabbard, looked hard at Dick Smith. "There ain't no more Vickers' place, mister," he said flatly. "They got burned out three nights ago."

"Burned out?" Dick Smith's eyes hardened. "Who did the job?"

"Your guess is better than mine, stranger. Long Jim Griffin' don't pay us to go into guessin' matches. You a friend of the Vickers outfit?"

"That," said Dick, "is somethin' you'll have time to figure out. I'll not be quittin' the country. You wouldn't know where I'd be likely to run into Old Man Vickers or Owen?"

"Not unless you want to foller what they call the trail over the Big Divide. Old Man Vickers and Owen is dead. You'll find Helen Vickers runnin' her store at Sun Prairie, I reckon. They buried Old Man Vickers there yesterday. Some claim Owen was burned up in the house. Others say he got drowned in the rapids at Catfish Island. Me, I don't know. I git paid top wages for not knowin' one damned thing. I'll be travelin' now. If this is a Marlin trap, mister, I got friends that'll take 'er up for me." The man rode away, leading the other horse.

Dick Smith rode on, his heart heavy. He wondered why he hadn't heard about the burning of the Vickers' ranch. Old

Man Vickers and Owen dead? It didn't seem possible. Why hadn't somebody at Dry Gulch told him? Then he remembered that he had been in jail three nights ago and had seen nobody but Sheriff Mark Huggins to talk to. He and the sheriff had done little talking, except when the law officer fired questions at him.

Old Rip Ripley certainly hadn't heard about it. But then old Rip had taken to the road after he had slipped Dick that gun through the bars of the jail window. And when Rip was on the road he kept visitors at a distance with his Bible preachings and scratching. Rip would get the news when he stopped at Jase Timberline's.

There was nothing for Dick Smith to do now but head for the little settlement of Sun Prairie.

HE HAD forgotten the existence of Helen Vickers. She had been a small little thing in pigtails the last time he had seen her—all eyes and skinny little legs, hiding behind her mother's skirts to peer out at him. That had been ten or twelve years ago, back in Wyoming.

Dick and his father had stopped at the Vickers place, staying over night. Dick and Owen had hid in the hayloft while their fathers and other ranchers talked nearly all night about the big cattle war that was then sweeping Johnson County like a prairie fire. Dick's father and Old Man Vickers and Rip Ripley had taken an active, deadly part in it.

When Dick's father had been found murdered, his body marked for identification by the killers, Dick, fifteen years old, had been outlawed along with old Rip and the Vickers. Old Man Vickers and Owen had come to Montana, fetching little Helen, whose mother had been killed, by intent or mistake, during the bloody fighting. Dick and other young cowpunchers had drifted. There had been a heavy bounty put on Rip Ripley's head. Even after ten years that bounty still held good if the dead body of Rip Ripley could be delivered to the right men down in Wyoming. For while the flames of that war no longer blazed with the ferocity it had attained at its height, the embers still glowed, smoldering beneath the gray ashes. Feuds within the bigger feud between the big cattlemen and the smaller ranchers had sprung up. Personal grudges between men had been settled by gunfire, and scattered bones of men who had died spotted the brushy coulees, bleached in the summer suns and winter drifts. The friends and kinfolks of those dead men had not forgotten, nor would they ever forget. They packed guns and made no threats. The right and the wrong of that bloody war was argued cautiously in far flung cow camps throughout the West. Men who had taken part in the war were almighty careful about discussing it in front of strangers.

A bunch of hard riding, quick triggered cowpunchers, who rode the outlaw trail, were outcasts from that war. They were called the Wind River Gang because they had drifted down into that strip of country between Wind River and the Owl Creek Mountains, banding together in self protection against their enemies. Rip Ripley had been the old leader of the Wind River Gang. Dick Smith had been perhaps the youngest member. Old Man Vickers and Owen owed much to the protection of the Wind River Gang. In return they had let it be known by word of mouth to the right men, that their Montana ranch offered shelter, a fresh horse, refuge to the members of the Wind River Gang. Dick Smith had stopped there once or twice, arriving after dark, departing before dawn.

By news known among outlaws as the rustling of the leaves, Dick Smith had gotten word that the Vickers were in a tight. He had come as quickly as he could, contacted old Rip Ripley, and had taken

care of an errand for the old leader of the gang. Some enemy must have tipped off the Dry Gulch sheriff that Dick was traveling with a price on his head. He had been jailed. Now it looked as if that delay had fetched him to the Vickers' range too late.

"Keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open," Rip had told him. "Don't trust the Griffin outfit or the Marlins either. They're fixin' for war. The Vickers range is in the middle. If Old Man Vickers and Owen are takin' ary part, you'll know when you talk to 'em. Long Jim Griffin is as dangerous as a coiled rattler. Ford Marlin and his brother Hugh are plenty tough. Play the game close to your belly and trust no man."

Dick Smith had sent word to the Vickers when to expect him. He was three days late. That arrest back at Dry Gulch, the delay, the attack on the Vickers and their deaths, all seemed, to Dick, to tie up together. Rip might figure it out and get the right answer, but there was no time now to talk to Rip. Right now Dick Smith's best bet was to find Helen Vickers, tell her who he was, find out from her just what sort of a tight her father and brother had been in, and who had wiped them out.

IT WAS sunrise when Dick Smith topped a ridge and looked down at the burned area below that had been the Vickers' ranch. Buildings and corrals were reduced to black ashes. What had been a neat, well kept ranch was now an ugly, sinister black scar. Dick rode down there, heavy hearted, thoughts of revenge milling around in his brain.

He rode slowly around the charred timbers and gray ashes. He was remembering Old Man Vickers and Owen as he had last seen them—the tall, straight-backed old cowman with white mustache and goatee, and Owen; tall, quiet-mannered and slow-smiling. They had fled Wyoming in search of peace. . . . Dick wondered if Old Man Vickers and Owen had lived long enough to fulfill the promise they had made at the grave of Owen's mother, to kill the man or men responsible for the bullet that had ended her life. Beyond the fulfillment of that oath, the grizzled cowman and his tall son wanted only to be left alone.

The message that had found Dick Smith in New Mexico had hinted that Old Man Vickers and Owen might have found the man or men who had killed Mrs. Vickers. It had also hinted that the men who had murdered Dick's father would be found.


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"The sign is right," Owen Vickers had written, "for you to drift north. We figure on being out of that old debt before long. There is a big chance for you to pay off what you owe. Time is getting short so you had better pony express your riding. The rocks are talking near Dry Gulch. The clouds are thick over the Rafter G and Rolling M ranges. It looks like a thunder storm. Lightning might strike twice in the same place. Can't tell a damn thing about it yet."

That first part about the debts could mean but one thing. They had located the man or men they had to kill. Also the murderers of Dick's father, Hank Smith. Pony express riding meant to come fast, changing horses often. That Dick had done, leading his War Dance horse along to use for the last leg of the journey. The sentence about the rocks talking near Dry Gulch meant that Old Rip was near there. A range war was looming up between the Griffin Rafter G outfit and the Marlins' Rolling M spread; it might include the Vickers outfit.

On that information Dick had left his outfit in New Mexico and come up the outlaw trail to Montana. Rip had gotten word to the scattered members of the old Wind River Gang to drift this way. If the Vickers were in a tight, Rip meant that the disbanded gang would again gather and lend a hand to Old Man Vickers.

DICK had pulled up his horse and was staring through narrowed eyes at the charred timbers of the main ranch house. The big bay, War Dance lifted its head ears pointing. As Dick's hand dropped to his gun, five men rode toward him from the willow thickets along the creek. Too late to run for it, Dick waited for them to ride up. Their hands were near their guns, their eyes hard with suspicion, as they looked Dick and his horse over.

They all rode horses branded Rolling M on the left thigh. The short, stocky man riding in the lead, Dick Smith knew to be Ford Marlin. Rip had described the two Marlins and Long Jim Griffin.

Ford Marlin's wide, square jaw jutted at a belligerent angle. His sage green eyes were as hard as green glass. His tone, when he spoke, was rasping.

"Just who in hell are you, stranger, and what are you doin' here? I don't want no lies for an answer."

"I'm not ridin' a Rafter G horse and I don't work for the Griffin outfit," said Dick Smith, angered by Ford Marlin's overbearing manner. "If that's what's bitin' your hide. I'm ridin' acrost what I reckon is the Vickers' Flyin' V range, where I have just as much right to be as you or any other man. I'm mindin' my own business and pickin' no arguments with anybody. But I don't aim to be shoved around too much, either. My hand is on my gun, and I figure I'm fast enough with it to kill you before you and your tough hands git me murdered. You won't be livin' to tell about it. But if anything happens to me, somethin' will happen to the outfit that murders me. That's just as sure as that sky overhead. Now either fill your hand or ride your way and let me go my direction. Name your game, mister!"

Ford Marlin's sunburned face was redder than ever. His green eyes glittered in the sunrise.

"He's got guts, cowboys," Ford Marlin grinned faintly, mirthlessly at his men. "Too much guts, mebby, for his own health. He ain't bluffin', neither. He means what he's sayin'. Any you boys ever see him before?"

They eyed Dick closely, shaking their heads. Ford Marlin took his hand from his gun. He fished tobacco and papers from the pockets of the old vest he wore unbuttoned, and rolled a quick cigarette with his blunt, strong fingers. Pulling the head of a match across the seat of his overalls, he cupped the flame and lit his

cigarette before he broke the uneasy silence.

"Ride over to the Rollin' M ranch if you're huntin' a fightin' job, stranger," Ford Marlin said bluntly. "Tell Hugh I hired yuh."

"I'm tellin' you what I told Long Jim Griffin," said Dick Smith. "My guns ain't for hire at any price. If I go on the warpath it will be for personal reasons." He grinned and added, "I'm shore glad this meetin' didn't turn into gun talk. I'm not rarin' to die yet."

"For a man that don't like to die, you shore hide your feelin's good," said Ford Marlin. "Let's go, boys. Let 'im ride his own direction."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Voice From Boothill

SUN PRAIRIE was hardly big enough to be called a town. There was a saloon, an eating place run by the fat, genial wife of the skinny little dried up man who was stock tender at the stage station there, and the general store, owned and run by Helen Vickers. She was the postmistress of Sun Prairie. The post-office was at the rear of the store.

Though Sun Prairie had no sort of peace officer, Dick Smith had waited until he had the cover of darkness to cloak his movements before he rode down its dusty main and only street. There were several saddled horses standing at the hitchrack in front of the saloon. The voices of men came from inside the place. Dick saw a light burning at the rear of the store and rode around to the back of the building.

He dismounted and knocked at the rear door. A woman's voice sounded from within. A voice that was none too steady.

"Who's there and what do you want?"

"You wouldn't remember me or my name, unless Owen and your father have told you about me. I'm Dick Smith from Wyoming."

Dick heard the bolt slide back. The door opened slowly. A girl in black stood in the lamplight. A girl with sleek, blue black hair and dark brown eyes that were shadowed with grief. Her face was chalk white under the tanned skin. She looked as if she had only hatred for the man who had claimed the friendship of the Vickers' family.

"I know who you are," she said, her voice brittle. "I know all about you and the other outlaws who have used our ranch for a way station. Only for you and others of your outlaw Wind River Gang, my father and brother would be alive tonight. They would be at the ranch, living a decent and honest and peaceful life. Haven't you and your kind done enough harm already? Why do you sneak here after dark and rap on my door? I have nothing to give you. No grub, no hiding place, no cartridges for your guns. I want to be left alone. Pass that word along to your skulking, gun-toting outlaw friends. Don't come here again. I don't want to see anything of you or your friends. Stay away from me!"

The door closed in Dick's face. He heard the heavy bolt slide into its socket. He stood there, dazed by the words she had flung at him. Then he swung back on his horse and rode to the big red barn where the stage horses were kept and where travelers could board their horses.

The skinny little old barnman needed little urging to loosen his tongue. Dick gave him a five dollar bill, then took care of War Dance himself. The burning of the Vickers' ranch and the killing of Old Man Vickers and Owen was fresh news, and he was eager to tell it to someone who hadn't heard the gruesome details. Helen Vickers had a room at their house and boarded with them, explained the little barnman, Sam Sneed.

For almost an hour Sam Sneed talked, and Dick Smith listened. Sneed talked a lot, repeating all manner of rumors he

had picked up at the barn and at the saloon, from the men who came and went. But it was plain that the little barnman had no vital information. It was hearsay news that conflicted and jumbled and in the end left Dick Smith about as lacking in real information as he had been before he reached Sun Prairie.

LONG JIM GRIFFIN, Sneed said, was stuck on Helen Vickers and wanted her to marry him. But, for that matter, so did both the Marlin brothers. Ford and Hugh Marlin had almost had a gun fight about her, Sneed explained. If Helen liked any one of them more than she did the others, she had a way of keeping it to herself. Not even Sneed's wife had been able to get much out of Helen Vickers.

Concerning the burning of the ranch and the killing of the Vickers, father and brother of Helen's, Sneed had several versions.

One theory he had mulled over in his mind was this. That Old Man Vickers had sided either with Long Jim Griffin or the Marlins in their range feud. Night riders from one or the other of the outfits had burned the Vickers out and killed them.

Another notion he'd spent a lot of thought on was this. That Old Man Vickers and Owen had refused to sell out. Both the Rafter G and Rolling M outfits wanted the Vickers' place. One outfit or the other had wiped them out.

Then there was this for a notion, and here Sneed had lowered his voice to a whisper. The Vickers' ranch had had some almighty shady acting visitors from time to time. It was hinted around that the Vickers place was a way-station for outlaws, and that horse thieves, shoving stolen horses through the country, had often stopped there at night with their stolen stock. Maybe the Vickers had quarreled with these outlaws and been killed and their ranch burned. Or it might be that honest ranchers who mistrusted the Vickers outfit had organized a vigilante bunch of night riders and wiped out the Vickers.

Somehow none of these theories excepting the last one seemed to have much foundation. Helen Vickers had blamed Dick and the Wind River Gang. It was plain that Old Man Vickers and Owen hadn't told Helen much about their affairs. They had kept a lot of things from her. Shocked, stunned by grief, she had somehow twisted what little she knew into distorted beliefs. She was blaming the best friends the Vickers had in the world for their deaths.

Dick remembered that the cowpuncher at the Griffin line camp had said that Owen might have drowned in the Catfish Island rapids. He felt Sneed out cautiously concerning Jase Timberline.

"I plumb fergot about that long-geared, whiskey-peddlin' scoundrel," Sneed had gotten a little excited. "Last time Owen and his dad was in town I heard 'em talkin' right here in my barn. They'd had some kind of a ruckus with Jase Timberline. I heard Owen say that Timberline was a long time overdue in hell, if what they'd learned was the truth. Old Man Vickers told Owen to lay low or he'd spoil the whole damn thing. He told Owen that it looked like Timberline was Dick Smith's bear meat."

"You're no friend of Timberline's."

"He's the dirtiest son of a snake that's ever cheated the gallows, mister. Now he mighta had a hand in the killin' of the Vickers, but he'd be too cowardly to tackle the job alone. He'd want help. But who'd help that ornery snake? Nobody in this country that I know. Long Jim Griffin and the Marlins both hate his innards. It'd be some of that coyote bunch that hides out in the badlands and robs honest men, to git money to squander on Jase Timberline's rot-gut likker."

DICK was hungry. He'd eaten his last square meal at Rip's camp. He left the barn and went on foot to the little restaurant. Sneed's wife cooked him a steak and fried potatoes and corn on the cob. The best meal, Dick swore, he had ever eaten. He had just finished paying for the meal when the rear door opened cautiously. Sneed peered in, saw that Dick was the only customer, and beckoned him mysteriously.

"Whatever on earth, Sam—?" began his wife.

"Hush, woman." He motioned her and Dick behind the door of a big pantry off the kitchen. "There's somethin' danged queer goin' on at the store. I seen three horsebackers ride up. They stopped in behind the store. One of 'em stayed on his horse, the other two got off. They rapped on the door and I seen Helen Vickers open it. They went right in, sort of shovin' her, and shut the door behind 'em. It might be a hold-up."

"There wouldn't be money or anything in the store, would there?" questioned Dick, hitching up his gun belt.

"There's the mail that come in this evenin'," said Sneed. "The stage stays over here all night. About this time of the month the payroll money for the Dry Gulch mines is in the registered sack."

"Stay here," Dick told Sneed's buxom wife, whose red cheeks had paled. He took Sneed's arm. "Slip back to the barn. My saddle gun is there in your harness room. If they get away from me, shoot to hit 'em when they ride past."

Dick slipped out the back door, his gun in his hand. He glanced across the street where he had seen the saddled horses at the hitchrack. The horses were gone. Keeping to the shadows, Dick approached the store. He rounded the rear corner of the store as the back door opened suddenly and two men, their faces covered by black masks, came out. One of them carried a canvas mail sack. The third man sat his horse, holding the bridle reins of the other two horses.

"Drop that sack!" barked Dick, crouching in the black shadow alongside the building. "Hands up!"

The three men shot at him at about the same instant. Bullets ripped the board wall of the store. The two men on foot ran for their horses, shooting as they went.

Dick Smith's six-shooter spat flame. The man carrying the mail sack staggered and fell. The other man on foot halted, reached for the sack. Dick's bullet struck his arm or shoulder. He jerked erect, empty handed, cursing as he scrambled aboard his horse. He and the man who had been holding the horses spurred off into the night. The man on the ground was writhing in pain, moaning and cursing. The two riders rounded the building, their horses at a dead run. The third horse, riderless, tried to follow, but was jerked to a stop when he stepped on the trailing bridle reins.

Dick heard no shots from the barn. He reckoned that little Sneed was too scared.

Keeping the wounded man covered, Dick approached him warily. "You try any tricks and I'll fill your belly full of lead," Dick warned him.

"You got me all shot to hell now!" groaned the man. "I'm dyin'!"

As Dick bent over him the man wisted over on his back. A gun in [illegible] hand spewed flame almost in Dick's face.

THE bullet nicked his ear, the flame and burning powder stung his face and eyes like red hot needles. He smashed the gun out of the wounded man's hand and brought the barrel of his six-shooter

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down across the would-be killer's skull. The stinging powder had half blinded him. His eyes felt as if they were filled with red hot sand.

He managed to jerk off the black silk neckscarf that masked the robber's face and used it to tie the man's hands behind his back. The prisoner was as motionless as a corpse. Dick wondered if he had killed him. Not that it mattered much. But alive, he might be made to talk.

Dick Smith picked up the mail sack with its contents and went in through the open doorway. In the lamplight he made out Helen Vickers, lying on the floor, her hands and feet tied, a gag in her mouth. Her dark eyes watched Dick as he dropped the mail sack on the floor and, squatting on his boot heels, opened his jackknife and cut the ropes that bound her, then cut the handkerchief that was tied across her mouth.

"I didn't aim to bother you again," Dick grinned faintly, "but——"

"You needn't rub it in."

He had helped her to her feet. The color was coming back into her cheeks now. She picked up the mail sack that had been ripped open at the top, and dumped the contents on a wide table used for sorting mail.

"I think it's all there—all but the letter. . . . The letter that I forgot to give you when you came."

"A letter for me? You mean they—?"

"One of them looked through the pigeon-holes where the sorted mail is kept. I saw him take the letter that had come for you. I'd put it in the general delivery pigeon hole.

" 'Here's the one for him,' the man said, and shoved it in his pocket. Then they cut open the registered sack and made sure they had the payroll money for the Dry Gulch Mine."

"Just a minute. Get yourself a drink of water or something. I'll fetch that hombre in here and look him over. You mind the sight of blood,"

"If I did, I'd be fainting now. The side of your face is smeared with it. You're hurt. Let me—"

"Back in a minute," Dick called over his shoulder. He was lifting the limp form of the wounded man from the ground when little Sneed came running up, carrying Dick's carbine. He was panting hard and his voice was a quivering, croaking noise.

"I emptied the gun at 'em as they went past the barn. I mighta hit one of 'em. He rode like he was shot."

"I didn't know till right now that I had a gun that made no noise when it was shot off. Take a look at the brand on that horse. Then trot on over to the restaurant and fetch hot water and clean rags for bandages. If this gent ain't dead we'll have to patch him up. I'll take that noiseless gun, Sneed."

Dick carried the man into the store and laid him on the floor. He groped in the man's pockets and fished out a crumpled letter. But his eyes were stinging and watering so that all he could make of the address on the envelope was a red blur. He showed it to the girl.

"Is this it? My eyes are sort of on the bum."

"That's it. There's blood smeared on it now, but that's the letter."

"I'll read it later." Dick took it from her and shoved it into his pocket. He pointed to the man on the floor. "Ever see him before?" he asked her.

"He and two other men came into the store right after the stage came in and I'd finished sorting the mail. They bought some cartridges. This man asked if there was any mail for Dick Smith. For some reason I lied to him. I told him there was no mail for anyone named Dick Smith. They went across to the saloon and I saw them drinking with the stage driver. The saloon door stood open

and I watched them getting the stage driver drunk. The stage driver was doing a lot of talking. He loves his free drinks and he's a worse gossip than Sam Sneed. And that's going some."

"I wish," said Dick, "that you'd get over this notion that I'm to blame for what happened to your dad and Owen. I'd heard they were in trouble and I came plumb from New Mexico to help 'em. If you'd trust me, and if I could trust you, I'd have you open this letter and read it to me. My eyes are powder burned and it might be days before I kin see well enough to read what's in it. It's mighty important."

"You've just done me a bigger favor than you realize," the girl said. "Those men knew my name and that I was Owen's sister. They meant to come back in here after they'd given the mail sack to the other man. I think they meant to kill me. I treated you shabbily. I'm sorry. I want to read that letter to you."

Dick handed her the blood-smeared letter. She slit open the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper. A sharp little cry burst from her tight throat.

"It's Owen's hand-writing! He can't be dead!"

HELEN VICKERS swayed as if she were about to faint. Dick put his arm around her shoulders, steadied her as she leaned heavily against him for a moment. Then he put her in a chair.

"Read it before Sneed gits here," he told her.

"The rocks will tell you where I am," Helen Vickers read, her voice a low whisper. "I just missed meeting you at Grouse Springs. Show this to Helen. I'm a long ways from dead. Tell her not to ride anywhere alone. Tell her to trust *nobody* but you. There's snake tracks everywhere. Ride careful. I'm afraid they've got you spotted."

Helen Vickers' voice trembled. Dick took the letter from her and lit a match, setting fire to the paper. It had burned to ashes when Sneed and his wife came in carrying a big kettle of hot water and some clean dishtowels for bandages.

Helen Vickers got up quickly. With visible effort she regained her composure.

"You don't know my name," Dick whispered to her.

She nodded and walked over to where Sneed's wife stood, her round face pale. "We'll talk about it later," Helen Vickers told her, taking the big kettle and filling a basin with the steaming water. She got some bottles of medicine from one of the store shelves.

The man on the floor moved a little, groaning. Dick bent over him, slitting the leg of his overalls and baring the wound. He fastened a tourniquet on the leg, cleansed the wound with a strong carbolic solution and dressed it, wrapping a tight bandage around it. The saloonkeeper from across the street and a drunken man, whom Dick guessed was the stage driver, stood near the rear door watching him as he worked. The stage driver's questions were quickly, bluntly silenced by Helen Vickers.

"You've talked too much for one evening, Handy. Go sleep it off. If you told those men about the payroll being here, it's going to cost you your job."

"Go on to bed, Handy," said the burly, red-faced saloonman. "You're plumb right, Miss Helen. He's mouthier than a soap-box politician. I done my best to shut 'im up. Say the word and I'll put the ol' coot on the Injun list and never sell him another drop."

"I kin git all I want at Timberline's," mumbled the short, bowlegged stage driver. "Fer nothin'."

"Go sober up," Dick Smith, his job done, stood up. "You're takin' this mail robber to Dry Gulch as soon as Sneed kin git your team hooked up. Your one

chance of saving your job is to deliver this gent to the sheriff at Dry Gulch. Sneed, you and the big feller git him sober if you have to soak him in the crick. Mrs. Sneed, you go along with 'em. Make some coffee strong enough to either sober him or kill him. This mail robbin' gent is comin' alive and I want to talk to him in private."

Helen Vickers got them all out and bolted the door. The wounded man was slowly coming out of it. Dick, at Helen's insistence, bathed his powder-burned face and eyes in hot water, then she rubbed some sort of strong smelling salve all over his face and eyelids.

"Now, mister," said Dick, when the man on the floor asked for a drink of whiskey, "let's hear you talk. Tell the story right and you'll git all the whiskey you kin swallow. But no talk, no likker."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Marlins Make Their Play

THERE was a timid rapping on the rear door. Dick opened it. Sneed stood there in the light. He motioned with a secretive, mysterious nod of his head. Dick followed him outside.

"That's a Rollin' M horse he rode, mister. I noticed the brands on the other two horses when they come to town. One rode a Rafter G horse. The third feller was ridin' a Vickers Flyin' V geldin'."

"Stolen horses, I reckon," said Dick. "Anything else on your mind, Sneed?"

The little barnman grinned foolishly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He held out a handfull of .30-30 cartridges.

"Found 'em on the floor of the barn where I was squatted when them two fellers rode past. I musta got buck fever like I did once when I seen my first big blacktail buck. I pumped every shell outa my gun without firin' a shot. I'd a-sworn I was shootin' at 'em, mister."

A grin spread across Dick's powder-burned face. Little Sneed was not lying. A man stricken by a sudden attack of what big game hunters call buck fever will do queer things.

"I bet that was the first time you ever taken a shot at a man, eh, Sneed?"

"The first time," the little stock tender nodded vigorously, "and I hope it's the last. If ever I killed a man I'd never sleep again without him hauntin' me with nightmares. And the missus would quit me cold."

"Then I'm glad you got that buck fever, Sneed." Dick shoved the cartridges back into the magazine of his carbine with a workman-like ease that made the little stock tender shiver.

"You ever kill a man, mister?"

"I'm killin' this 'un we got here," said Dick grimly, "if he don't behave nice." Dick closed the door slowly in Sneed's face.

"Work on the stage driver, Sneed. And if anybody rides up, no matter who it is, tip me off. You're all right, Sneed. You've got more nerve than most big men."

"Think so? Think so, mister?" Sneed's leathery face was wreathed with smiles as the door closed him out.

Dick Smith walked over to where the wounded man sat on the floor. The man's hands had been untied and he was going through his pockets with furtive haste as Dick turned from the door.

"Lose somethin', mister?" Dick asked coldly.

"I was huntin' for cigarette makin's. Who are you, anyhow? Some lawman with your badge pinned to your undershirt?"

"I'll ask the questions. Who sent you three brave hombres here to rob the post-office and hurt this lady?"

"You'd never guess, mister. It was Santy Claus." The man's lips twisted in a snarl.

"Maybe it would be better," Dick turned to Helen Vickers, "if you went outside for a few minutes. What I'm goin' to do to this tough gent is not goin' to be pretty for a lady to watch."

"Why, you—" The wounded man's string of profanity was cut short as Dick's open handed slap spun the man's head sideways.

"And the next time you cuss," Dick promised him, "I'll swab out your dirty mouth with sheep dip. Better step outside, ma'am."

Helen Vickers looked at Dick, alarm in her dark eyes. Dick winked covertly and took her to the door.

"Wait just outside the door," he told her in a low tone. "I'm not goin' to hurt him bad."

WHEN she had gone, Dick tied the man's hands behind his back. Then he looked on the shelves until he found what he wanted. It was a bottle of Indian Herb Tonic. Once Dick had tasted the stuff. It had been bitter as gall and quinine. He emptied out half the contents of the bottle and filled it with pepper sauce. He shook the bottle vigorously and came back to where the man lay on the floor.

"This," said Dick grimly, "is your medicine, snake. You was yellin' for a drink. You're gettin' it right now. It's guaranteed to eat the enamel off tinware. A good dose of this will eat holes in your innards in an hour. But you don't die that quick. It takes about twelve hours. Twelve hours of hell."

He grabbed the man by the hair, tilted his head back, pried his mouth open with the blade of his jackknife and poured enough of the vile stuff down the victim's throat to make him swallow two or three big slugs of the brownish, fiery, nauseating stuff.

The man let out a howl of agony as the peppery fluid burned down his throat and into his stomach. Then he groaned, his eyes wild with horror.

Dick Smith stood back, the black bottle in his hand. His grin was wicked, his eyes hard.

"That ain't a big enough dose to kill a man but it'll give you the general idea. You may be able to throw this first dose up. But the second dose always stays down because your stomach muscles will be kinda paralyzed."

The man lay on his side, his face working convulsively. Beads of cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He made animal-like moaning sounds as he writhed in agony. Dick got a mop bucket and held the man's head when he vomited a minute or two later. Then the man lay back, bathed in sweat. He was still retching a little and his whole insides were still burning as if acid were eating into his throat and stomach.

"I kin give you water. That would help some. But I won't. I'm givin' you the second dose. Then hogtie you and throw you on the stage. Your magpie friend Handy will listen to your screamin' all the way from here to Dry Gulch."

Dick yanked the man by his damp, matted hair, and pried at his mouth with the knife blade that cut the corners of his lips a little.

"Water!" croaked the man. "Gimme water! I'm afire inside! I'll talk!"

"All right. Who hired you three hombres?"

"I don't know who's payin' the bill, but Jase Timberline hired us. Water, mister, for Gawd's sake!"

A few minutes later Dick opened the door and motioned Helen inside. The prisoner lay on his side, his face a sick, greenish gray. Otherwise he showed no sign of having been tortured. The girl had heard his howl of pain and his moaning. She looked relieved to find the man alive.

Dick showed her the bottle, grinning.

"Half Injun Herb Tonic, half hot pepper sauce. It turned the trick. I learned all I need to know. Is that stage driver sober, I wonder?"

"He's helping hook up his four horses. But about this registered mail—?"

"I'm writin' a little note to Sheriff Mark Huggins of Dry Gulch to come and git it, personal. He'll be surprised when he reads the name of the writer. I don't think he knows how to take a joke on himself."

Dick had a five minutes talk with the now sober Handy. Then they loaded the wounded prisoner, his hands and feet tied, on a pile of horse blankets inside the coach.

"Remember this, Mister Snake," Dick told the wounded man, "You've squealed. You'll be safer in jail than you will be if Timberline takes a notion to cut you loose when the stage stops at Catfish Island Crossin'. Handy knows you talked. His orders are to tell Timberline if that long-geared whiskey peddler tries to take you away from him. Whether you land safe in jail or whether Timberline feeds you to the catfish is somethin' you'll have to figure out for yourself. So-long, snake."

IT WAS the habit of both the Griffin and Marlin outfits to keep several horses at Sneed's barn in case they needed fresh mounts. Dick saddled a long-legged sorrel that looked like the best horse in the barn. The sorrel wore the Rafter G brand.

"If Long Jim ketches you on that horse, mister, he'll kill you for a horse thief."

"That's somethin' I'll have to risk, Sneed."

"Or if he shows up here and finds that sorrel gone—"

"Show him that bay of mine and tell him I just borrowed his sorrel. Long Jim Griffin will understand."

Dick and Helen Vickers walked over toward the store, Dick leading his saddled horse.

"I'll find Owen," he promised her. "Remember, you're not to leave Sun Prairie. Look for us when we show up."

The moonlight was on her uplifted face. Helen Vickers looked too beautiful just now. Dick kissed her as her hands tightened in his. There was no wild passion in the kiss. She smiled softly into his eyes.

"That was sweet of you, Dick. It was more than I deserve. The way I treated you—"

Dick held her in his arms while she sobbed, her whole body trembling. For the first time since tragedy had struck its ugly blow, the girl had someone she could trust, someone who could give her the comfort and strength she so needed.

"It wouldn't be right to talk about it now, Helen," he told her, when she kissed him good-bye some minutes later. "I'll wait till another time. Then I'm goin' to ask you to marry me."

"I think I could give you the right answer now, Dick. We're not strangers, exactly. I remember the first time I saw you. You looked very solemn and grand. You wore a six-shooter. You gave Owen a fancy horsehair hatband. I swiped it. Later, I told him and he gave it to me. It's on my hat now. You were quite a hero to Owen. To me you were more than that. If you want me to marry you, Dick, you have my answer now."

Dick's head was in the stars as he rode away from Sun Prairie. The stars were paling. A new day was coming—a day that would have its dangers. But Dick Smith was too happy, his heart was too full of this thing we call love for him to even think of danger.

The sight of several riders coming jerked him roughly from his land of dreams. In the early gray of dawn Dick rode to meet the four men.

They spread out, riding four abreast, to block the trail. He reined up, his right hand near his gun.

HE FORGOT that his injured ear was bandaged. That his face was pocked with black powder marks. He reckoned that the red-headed man with the cropped moustache and greenish eyes was Ford Marlin's brother, Hugh.

"You just come from Sun Prairie?" asked Hugh Marlin bluntly.

"That's the right guess. You Marlins shore git in the saddle early. It was about an hour later than this, yesterday mornin', when I met Ford Marlin."

"You're the fightin' rooster he jumped at the Vickers place? He didn't tell me you was bunged up."

"I wasn't, then. I got this way at Sun Prairie."

"You're the big hero Handy was tellin' us about when we met him along the road. You jump around quicker'n a flea. Ford fergot to tell me you was hired out to Long Jim Griffin." Hugh Marlin's tone was frigid.

"What gives you that notion, Marlin?"

"You're forkin' a Rafter G horse."

"Just borrowed this geldin' at Sneed's barn. I'm hired out to nobody. And now if you'll open the trail, I'll be ridin' along."

"You shore manage to git to where things are goin' on, don't you, stranger? Your name's Dick Smith, ain't it?"

"I didn't say."

"You didn't need to. We stopped at Catfish Island Crossin' last evenin'. Sheriff Mark Huggins was just pullin' out for Dry Gulch. It taken that long to git his posse sobered up. He thinks you drowned in Catfish Rapids. When he had gone I got it from Timberline that the way he read the sign, you'd got to the island and landed on the north side of the Missouri. There was other horse sign that told him there was two more fellers had been to the island and back."

"News shore travels," said Dick. "What are you gettin' at, Marlin?"

"I'm gettin' at this, Dick Smith. That your sign is tangled up with Long Jim Griffin's sign. You're ridin' a Rafter G horse. And mebby you don't know it but it ain't healthy for a Rafter G man to travel alone when he's off his range. Let 'im through, boys. He's got his warnin'."

"Just a minute, Marlin," grinned Dick, his eyes hard. "The next time you buy information from Jase Timberline, just make certain that it ain't as bad as the rot-gut whiskey he peddles. That's all."

Dick rode through the four men as they opened the trail. He half expected them to gang up on him but they let him pass. He felt Hugh Marlin's green eyes boring into his back as he rode on. Not until he was out of gun range did he draw a deep breath. His hand came away from the wounded mail-robber's six-shooter he had tucked in the waistband of his overalls. He packed it now for a second gun. A man needed a sneak-gun in a country like this.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Echo of the Feud Guns

THE rocks were talking to Dick Smith. He read the white lettering on the first granite boulder where the wagon tracks were so dim he could hardly follow them: *Beware, ye sinners!*

That meant that he was to keep on ahead, following the wagon tracks where Rip's wagon had passed along.

*Prepare to meet thy doom!*

Which meant that he was to take the next dim, narrow trail to the right. It would be marked by a single white daub, no bigger than a dollar, on a tree trunk or a bush or a rock.

Dick found it, and found himself getting into the heart of the roughest bad lands.

*Beware of the eyes of the devil!*

Dick rode cautiously now, his hand near his gun. That sign meant that he was being watched. It made him feel uneasy. Rip had taught him the code he had devised. For half an hour he followed the twisting trail that skirted the boggy, white-crusted soap holes. He was going up a canyon that was narrowing. High sides, spotted with scrub pines and brush that could screen men waiting in ambush. That canyon looked like it was going to narrow to a high walled box. Though it was early afternoon the shadows in the floor of the canyon were getting black.

*For only the honest can enter his gates!*

The bold white letters faced Dick. They were painted on the sheer rock wall of the box canyon.

Dick Smith pulled up. The sorrel's ears were pricked forward. Dick slid his six-shooter from its holster and stared through slitted eyes that still were partly blind from powder burns, trying to see what the long legged sorrel saw or sensed in the brushy canyon ahead. But nothing stirred or moved.

The sign on the cliff wall meant that he was coming to a hide-out. But there could be enemies as well as friends hidden in that brush.

"Take off your mask, Dick! Even with your earmuffs on, you can't fool your old pardner!"

A tall, lean jawed, hazel eyed cowpuncher stepped from behind a big granite boulder, a carbine in the crook of his left arm. He walked with a limp and the left arm that held the saddle gun was bandaged and in a sling made from what looked like the leg of a pair of red flannel drawers. A heavy black stubble of whiskers marred the clean jaw line. There was a slow smile on the cowpuncher's face.

"Owen! Owen, you son of a gun!"

Dick quit his horse with a leap. They pounded one another on the back, wrestled, until Owen Vickers sat astride Dick's chest, gouging playfully his eyes.

"Licked, Smith?"

"Licked for the present, Vickers. Next time I'll call for guns."

"Make 'er knives. I've promised my best gal I'd fetch her a Dick Smith gizzard for breakfast."

"You got a wing tied up or I'd never have let you straddle me. Git up. You weigh a ton."

"Who chawed your ear off and blowed black specks in your face?" Owen Vickers got up, dragging Dick to his feet. They stood there, eyeing one another, grinning.

"Who put your arm in a sling?" countered Dick.

THE grin on Owen Vickers' face faded. The sparkle went out of his deep-set hazel eyes. "They got the Old Man, Dick. Set fire to the ranch and murdered him as he came out of the burnin' house. There was one of the cowboys in the house with him. They shot him, too. Then they rode off like they had come—wolves in the night. I sighted the blaze. I'd bin to Sun Prairie and was on my way home. The cowpuncher was still alive. He'd played dead when they looked him over. He told me the story. There were three of 'em—strangers. They thought the cowboy was me. They said somethin' he couldn't quite ketch about Catfish Island Crossin'. I hit the trail for there.

"When I got there I didn't bother to ring the big bell Jase Timberline has rigged on the north bank to call him and have him fetch his ferry. I shoved my horse in the river and started to swim it. It was white moonlight. They let me get near the south bank, then opened up on me. They must have made out who I was. Timberline has eyes like a damned mountain lion, at night.

"They killed my horse. I swam under water, headed downstream for the upper point of Catfish Island. There was a bullet hole in my left arm, but that was about all. The current almost pulled me into the rapids. I got lamed up a little on the rocks before I got ashore on the island. I heard Timberline holler to 'em that I'd gone down the rapids, to come on to the saloon and have a drink on him because Owen Vickers was eatin' breakfast in hell."

"Who were the gents that burned the ranch and killed your father?" Dick Smith asked briefly. "You said they were strangers. But you'd have some notion who they were, who they worked for, the brands on their horses. That cowpuncher and the Old Man must have had some kind of an idea who they were."

"The cowpuncher knew the horses, Dick. One was a bald-faced black horse that belongs to Long Jim Griffin. Another of 'em was ridin' Ford Marlin's big blue roan horse he calls Blue Dog. The third gent was ridin' one of my top-horses. The horses were stolen, of course. The three men were hired by Jase Timberline. Timberline fought in the Johnson County War in Wyoming. He rode under another name down there. Timberline and his gun-totin' renegades killed your dad, Dick. They were the men who made the night raid that night when my mother came to the door and was shot down. They killed the Old Man and the cowpuncher they figured was me. Just to keep 'em fooled, I burned the cowpuncher's dead body. Jase Timberline don't know for certain whether I was killed at the ranch or drowned in Catfish Island Rapids. But he's got me counted off as dead. Which gives me a chance to git at him better. Rip is watchin' him."

"I figured Rip would be camped with you here in the canyon. The writin' on the rocks—"

"I had Rip's can of paint and his brush. Rip is camped near Catfish Island Crossin'. He's watchin' Jase Timberline like a cat watches a mouse. Timberline has bin ribbin' this range war between the Marlins and Long Jim Griffin. The Marlins hate Jim Griffin, and Jim hates them. But they'd never start a war if Timberline didn't egg 'em on. . . . How's Helen? How is she takin' it?"

"Why didn't you tell a man you had the most beautiful sister in the world?" countered Dick.

"So that's the way the wind blows, is it?"

"Git used to lookin' at me," chuckled Dick. "I'm goin' to be your brother-in-law before long. That's the way the wind blows." His face reddened under Owen's scrutiny. Their hands gripped, and for a long moment neither of them spoke.

"LONG JIM GRIFFIN," said Owen Vickers, "will take this news mighty hard. It wasn't more than a week ago that Jim stopped at the ranch and told me and the Old Man that he was askin' Helen to marry him. He had a diamond ring in his shirt pocket that he was goin' to give her. That's the last time I saw Jim."

"He was afoot on Catfish Island," Dick told Owen. "One of his cowhands seemed to know all about the burnin' of your ranch. He said somethin' about you bein' drowned in Catfish Island Rapids. He was at the line camp on the north side of the river. How far did you trust Long Jim Griffin?"

"As far as I trusted any man, considerin' that I've quit trustin' anybody but you and Rip. Why?"

"Helen wasn't wearin' any engagement ring. She shore hadn't promised Long Jim Griffin that she'd marry him. How do you know but what Jim Griffin got on the prod and had somethin' to do with the burnin' of your ranch."

"That's possible. But I'd hate to be-

lieve it, Dick. Jim Griffin has done us some favors here and there."

"Because he likes Helen. But if Helen turned him down cold—"

"Jim would like as not take it hard. He's a bad loser. And if he hates anybody, he's a snake."

"Jim Griffin was on Catfish Island the same night you landed there, I figure."

"Then it was his horse and saddle I stole. I found a saddled horse tied to a tree, there on the island. I didn't see the man. I needed a horse and saddle. I swam the horse to the north side, rode up the river a few miles, then forded to the south bank and located Rip at Grouse Springs. It was three nights after the ranch burned when I located Rip. You'd just left. Dick, what was Long Jim Griffin doin' on Catfish Island?"

"He told me his horse had drowned."

"Jim Griffin lied, Dick. And here's somethin' to think over. The horse I found on Catfish Island was one of my own—a Flyin' V geldin'. The saddle was one that was made in Johnson County, Wyoming. Figure that one out."

"You still have that saddle, Dick?"

"It's the only one I own now."

"Let's have a look at it. That saddlemaker at Buffalo, Wyoming never made two saddles alike. And if it was a saddle that he made to order he'd carve the owner's name or brand on it. Nothin' fancy. Just the name or brand carved somewhere where you'd have to hunt to find it. I'm curious to see that hull you stole on Catfish Island."

Five minutes later they were examining the saddle by the light of a campfire. Dick Smith struck a match and pointed to some small carved lettering on the underneath side of the pommel.

"Jim Jason," Owen read the name aloud.

"Jim Jason," nodded Dick Smith. "That's the name of the man who did the murdering for that big cow outfit down in Johnson County. He did a lot of cold-blooded killing that Rip Ripley got blamed for. Jim Jason is the man who—"

"Jim Jason," said Owen Vickers slowly, "is the man who killed my father and burned our ranch. Jim Jason was either there or he bossed the job from a distance."

"Whew! Then how did Long Jim Griffin git Jim Jason's saddle and that Flying V horse? And what was he doin' on Catfish Island that night?"

"I never was good at puzzles, Dick. It looks like Long Jim Griffin used to be Jim Jason. Helen might figure it out. She has a way of dopin' out things."

"She had me doped out all right when she slammed the door in my face. Blamed everything on me and the Wind River Gang. How much did you ever tell her about us and the Wyoming war?"

"Darned little, Dick. The Old Man and I always figured that what she didn't know could never hurt her."

"Somebody has told her things. It wasn't you or the Old Man. Then it must have been Long Jim Griffin."

"You ain't sayin' that because you might be jealous, are yuh?" There was a grin on Owen's face, but Dick knew that he had Owen Vickers thinking hard.

"I'm jealous of Jim Griffin or any other man that looks sideways at Helen. I'll club down the ears of ary man—"

"Jim Griffin ain't the only man that has hoped to marry Helen," said Owen. "There's Ford and Hugh Marlin. The Marlins have heard the rustlin' of the leaves. They rode along that stretch of Powder River in Johnson County, and they had guns in their hands when they made their rides. Jim Griffin and the Marlins were on the same side in that range war. They used other names in Wyoming and they got enough on one another to git some plain and fancy hangin' done."

"NOW," said Dick, "I think we're gittin' the tally. The Marlins and Long Jim Griffin fought on the same side in the Wyoming war. That was on the side of which layout? Big ranchers or little 'uns?"

"The little 'uns."

"And Jim Jason," said Dick, "was the tough killer for what we called the cattle kings, with their crowns wore jack-deuce. I think we got the general notion now. It backs up what Rip was tellin' me. And partner, if we ever hope to see Rip Ripley alive, we got to rattle our hocks. Because Jim Jason is the man who had Rip Ripley outlawed in Wyoming!

"Rip never saw Jim Jason to know him. I know that. Jim Jason was a traitor to both sides. He played both ends against the middle. All he wanted out of that war was the bounty he could collect on the men he murdered. I heard my father say that it was shore enough bad luck to know Jim Jason, even to know him by sight. He naturally couldn't afford to be recognized, so whenever a man spotted him, that man was killed before he got time to spread Jim Jason's description."

Dick spoke slowly. "Murders were blamed on Rip Ripley. It got so bad that men on his own side distrusted Rip. Rip had to pull out or git lynched by men he'd befriended and fought for. Your dad and my dad trusted him, as did the few men who called themselves the Wind River Gang. We were the only friends he had left.

"It made Rip bitter—almighty bitter, Owen. I know Rip better than any man knows him. He's sort of taken my father's place in my heart. We camped together many and many a night and he'd talk to me. He let his hair and whiskers grow and got that gospel wagon of his. That was the best disguise he could figure out.

"He's livin' for just one thing—to track down and kill Jim Jason. He told me he was certain he'd locate Jason somewhere near Catfish Island Crossin'. That's all he'd say about it. I figured he suspected Timberline. But if this saddle belonged to Long Jim Griffin, then Jim Griffin is Jim Jason. And Rip's life ain't worth a plugged dime. It's up to you and me, Owen, to locate Rip right now and tell him about this saddle. We're backin' that old gent's play. Let's go!"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Enemy to the Rescue

THERE had been a timber fire in the bad lands, and the smoke that hung in the sky had painted the round moon a reddish tint that gave it the color of blood. The smoke had blotted out the stars so that there was only that blood-red ball in a black sky.

The river was a wide, black strip that whispered and muttered ugly secrets to the clay banks. The giant cottonwoods were shadows that seemed to take on life.

Dick and Owen located Rip's camp in the bad lands behind Jase Timberline's place at Catfish Island Crossing.

The covered wagon was there. The ashes of his campfire were still warm and the coffee in the black pot had not yet grown cold. But Rip Ripley was not there. Gone also was one of his horses.

Dick looked in the wagon, striking a few matches to give him light. There was a grim, hard set to his jaw when he told Owen the result of his search.

"Rip's saddle and carbine are gone. And that ain't all. I found a pair of scissors and a shavin' outfit, with lather in the mug and on the brush. Rip has cut off his long hair and whiskers. He's saddled his horse and gone on the war trail. His Bible is spread open and a passage in it is underlined with a pencil. The passage is from the Book of Psalms.

It reads, 'The wicked shall be turned into hell. . . .' Partner, Rip Ripley has gone gunnin' for Jim Jason. And he's headed straight for the Catfish Island Crossin'!"

After they mounted their horses and headed for Jase Timberline's place, Owen Vickers broke a heavy silence.

"Long Jim Griffin saved the Old Man's life a couple of years ago, Dick. It's hard to think that he had anything to do with the burnin' of the place and killin' the Old Man."

"Helen ain't wearin' his ring," said Dick Smith stubbornly. "When she turned him down, Jim Griffin throwed off his sheep's wool and turned wolf. If he didn't want to risk anything by doin' the job himself, Jase Timberline was for hire. I ain't sayin' that Long Jim Griffin did the killin' and burnin'. He'd play his cards so that he could show up later and Helen would be glad to claim his protection. That's the way a smart man would play it. And Long Jim Griffin ain't what you'd call dumb. So far as that goes, he had me fooled. I kinda liked the long-geared son when I met him. I taken to him better than I did to Ford and Hugh Marlin. Yonder's a light. That ain't Timberline's place."

"It's a Marlin line camp," said Owen. "They use it when they're movin' cattle across the river. Ride careful. This time of year there shouldn't be anybody there. This is Marlin range we're on now. And the Marlins do their shootin' first and ask their questions later."

"So I've bin told," said Dick. "Drop behind, Owen. No use in both of us gittin' shot at. I'm gamblin' that Long Jim Griffin is Jim Jason. So I'm makin' a dicker with the Marlins. If anything happens to me, you git through somehow to Jase Timberline's place. That's where Rip hopes to cut Jim Jason's sign. Git there and side ol' Rip. I'm havin' a medicine talk with the Marlins."

Before Owen Vickers could stop him, Dick had spurred his horse to a lope. He headed for the light, whistling Sam Bass to announce his coming. He rode with his six-shooter in his hand, and trusted to luck and his Maker, to see him through.

HALF a dozen saddled horses showed like misshapen shadows near the empty corrals. Men on foot lurked in the black shadows of the buildings and pole corrals. Dick knew that guns covered him as he rode up boldly and halted in the shaft of dim yellow light that came from the open doorway of the cabin. He shoved his six-shooter into its holster but kept his hand on the butt of the gun.

"All right, you Marlin warthogs!" he called out. "Let's talk some turkey. You said you was hirin' tough hands."

"That's him, men! Take 'im alive! You're under arrest, Dick Smith! Reach for the moon!"

Dick groaned. He wanted to laugh and cuss at the same time. That was the voice of Sheriff Mark Huggins from Dry Gulch.

Dick lifted his hands, cussing himself for a thick-skulled idiot. "Hell," he grinned ruefully as the sheriff's heavy bulk showed up, "I thought you and your blood-thirsty manhunters had sobered up by now and gone home."

"Not by a jugful, mister. When Mark Huggins takes the trail he's better'n a Mountie when it comes to gittin' his man. I figgered there was somethin' fishy about you bein' drowned. So I let on like I was goin' home, then I doubled back. Don't try no tricks or we'll plug yuh, mister! We got no time to fool around tonight. The Marlins and Long Jim Griffin is lockin' horns before daybreak, and I'm stickin' around to arrest the survivors of that battle. Boys, take his guns and tie him up. If he puts up a fight, knock him between the horns. This'll put me in office fer another term."

The stolid, methodical sheriff of Dry Gulch was no man to trifle with. He had taken his oath of office and he would enforce it to its last word and letter. Dick wondered if Owen would show up. If he did, and if he tried to talk Sheriff Mark Huggins into releasing his prisoner, it would be like that serious-minded peace officer to arrest Owen also.

Dick had blundered into a deadfall trap and no mistake. For one desperate moment he thought of trying to shoot his way free, but half a dozen guns covered him. Those deputies would shoot—no mistake about that.

"What's this about the Marlins and Jim Griffin lockin' horns tonight, Sheriff?" asked Dick as he dismounted and let the sheriff's men tie his hands behind his back.

"I reckon you know more'n I do about it, young feller. You rid up here, bolder'n brass, offerin' to hire out to the Marlins. You know danged well they're goin' to scrap 'er out tonight at Jase Timberline's place. This range war is comin' to a head tonight and I ain't liftin' a hand to stop 'em. Let dog eat dog, says I, and the devil take the hindmost.

"That long-maned, white-whiskered locoed ol' rock-painter was shore right when he prophesied this war. He aims to step in and stop the battle—as if a psalm-singin', locoed ol' coot like him could keep Long Jim Griffin and the Marlins from killin' one another! Put the prisoner in the cabin, boys. This is once that he ain't goin' to slip his bobbles. Tie him hand an' foot. And gag him."

Sheriff Mark Huggins was in a rare good humor. By effecting the capture of his escaped prisoner he had recaptured his own self-esteem. He swelled with pride and boasted to Dick and to his deputies how he would now be able to slap back at the scoffers who had openly joshed him about being locked up in his own jail. He spoke of the coming election and how he would win now, hands down, over any opponent.

HE and his men would wait until the gun-smoke had cleared away at Catfish Island Crossing, then he would collect the wounded and the victors who would be celebrating on Jase Timberline's rot-gut whiskey. He painted a vivid and colorful word picture of his triumphant return to Dry Gulch with more prisoners than you could shake a stick at. Those who survived the bloody gun-battle at Catfish Island Crossing would be tried for murder. Tried and convicted, Mark Huggins stated with flat finality.

He glared down at Dick Smith who sat, bound hand and foot, in a corner of the lighted cabin.

"The law has come to Montana," he pronounced, "and Sheriff Mark Huggins is goin' to be the man responsible fer law and order in this here part of the state. When gun-totin', spur-jinglin', town-paintin' hoodlums like the Marlins and Long Jim Griffin is dead er hung behind the bars at Deer Lodge Prison, Sheriff Mark Huggins will be wearin' a gold badge and smokin' seegars!"

"As purty a speech, Sheriff, as ever

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I heard durin' election time!" The lazy, drawling voice came from outside the window that had no glass panes. At the sound of it Dick Smith's heart jumped.

"Don't go reachin' for your gun, Sheriff. Tell your Dry Gulch town deputies to take 'er easy. I'm not foolin'. Turn that prisoner loose and be damn quick about it. Give him back his guns. He's goin' to need 'em. You thick-headed, blunderin' badge-polisher, you got a man tied up there that saved the Dry Gulch Mine payroll when three of Jase Timberline's tough hands held up the Sun Prairie post office. The Dry Gulch Mine folks put you in office. They'll yank that tin star off your vest almighty quick if they ever find out you've pinched the man that saved their payroll. Huggins, if this leaks out you won't even be able to git a sheepherder's job in Montana. Turn him loose and mebbyso we'll think about forgettin' about it."

The last time Dick Smith had heard that voice was when he had said goodbye to Long Jim Griffin on Catfish Island. The sheriff had recognized the voice of the man outside in the dark. Plainly, he had a thorough respect for Long Jim Griffin.

"Sounds like another damned josh on me," he told his deputies, "But I never knowed Jim Griffin to lie. Turn the prisoner loose, boys. Give him back his guns. I wish I was drunk again, or dead!"

Dick was back on his feet again, and armed. He walked outside, his eyes hard, the grin on his mouth a twisted line.

"Git your horse, Dick Smith," Long Jim Griffin's voice called lazily from the black shadows. "This squares us. I know what you're thinkin', but don't try it. My gun's in my hand and I'm hid in the shadows. You'll find Owen Vickers between here and Jase Timberline's place. I left him tied to a tree. If you aim to tend to any business at Catfish Island Crossin', don't waste your time standin' here. Owen Vickers will tell you what it's all about. Fork your horse and ride like hell if you want to side Rip Ripley. You'll find him at Catfish Island Crossin' with his hands full of trouble if he's still alive. Rattle your dewclaws, cowboy. And good luck!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A Bible, a Gun—and a Man!

DICK SMITH found Owen Vickers tied to a tree. There was a lump on Owen's head and his six-shooter was on the ground near his feet.

"I met Long Jim Griffin on the trail, Dick," Owen explained when his arms had been freed. "To be plumb truthful about it, he was in behind that patch of buck-brush as I came along, circlin' to see what was goin' on at that line camp. He knew me and my horse and rode out to meet me, callin' out to me that he was Long Jim Griffin.

"I throwed down on him and made him git off his horse. I aimed to tie him to this tree and told him so. I told him we'd found out he was Jim Jason from Wyoming. I made him drop his gun and was tyin' his hands when he kicked me in the belly. He got my six-shooter and rapped me on the head. When I came awake I was tied to the tree.

"He said he watched me take his horse and saddle there on Catfish Island. Said I needed the horse worse than he did so he let me have it. That he was on the island hidin' and watchin' Jase Timberline's place with field glasses to learn what he could about things he suspected was goin' on there. Things that concerned the Marlins. He told me that if he was as ornery as you and I claimed he was, he could have killed me when I landed on the island that night. Instead of that, he'd let me take his horse and

leave him afoot there, and him not able to swim ten feet.

"I'd let it slip that you had gone over to the Marlin line camp to throw in with the Rolling M outfit. He said you'd gotten him off Catfish Island and he reckoned he owed you a favor—that it was Sheriff Mark Huggins and his posse, not the Marlins, over at the line camp. He hoorawed me some, then forked his horse and rode off like he was playin' a big joke on us both. But before he left he said that Rip Ripley was at Catfish Island Crossin' and that Rip was goin' to be in a tight before long. When I accused him of bein' Jim Jason he said to ask Rip Ripley."

"Let's git away from here before Mark Huggins and his town bravos take a notion to ride this way," said Dick. "It may be a trap, but we'll have to take Jim Griffin's word for it that Rip's at Jase Timberline's place and needs us."

"You still think Long Jim is Jim Jason, Dick?"

"Partner," said Dick as he swung into the saddle, "after the big boneheaded play I made back yonder, I'm all through guessin' at anything. I'm in Mark Huggins' class when it comes to thinkin'."

Owen led the way, taking the shortest trail to Catfish Island Crossing. They sighted the saloon light through the darkness that hung over the river like a pall. Below sounded the ominous roar of Catfish Rapids. Overhead the blood-red moon hung in a black sky.

As they rode nearer they could see men inside the lighted saloon. A dozen horses stood outside at the hitchrack. Their hands on their guns, Dick and Owen rode up. Nobody challenged their coming.

Dick could see Jase Timberline behind the bar, setting out glasses and a bottle. His long, lantern-jawed, unshaven face was masklike. His eyes shifted restlessly. His right hand never got more than a few inches away from his six-shooter.

Ford and Hugh Marlin stood together at one end of the bar, their filled glasses in their left hands, their eyes on the open doorway. The stage-driver, Handy, half drunk, sat at a table with two tough looking men whom Dick reckoned were the two mail robbers who had gotten away from him at Sun Prairie. Handy was scared and was drinking to keep his nerve. In a corner, on a pile of dirty blankets and sougans, lay the wounded mail robber.

But the man who drew the attention of Dick and Owen was a tall, lean man with a drooping white moustache. The upper part of his face was the color of saddle leather. His jaw, however, was much lighter in color. His eyes under the slanted brim of his hat, were sky blue, bright, hard and cold as ice. He wore two six-shooters in holsters tied low on his lean thighs.

"It's Rip!" whispered Dick. "Rip, just as he looked before he grew whiskers and long hair!"

RIP RIPLEY had a boot heel hooked over the brass rail in front of the bar. He leaned with his back to the bar, his head turned a little to keep Jase Timberline within the focus of his hard blue eyes. And he also watched the two men at the table with Handy.

Every man in the place seemed tense, on edge, and their eyes kept watching the open doorway. They all must have heard Dick and Owen ride up. Now they were waiting to see who would come through the doorway. Rip Ripley alone seemed to have no interest in who might be coming.

"Don't recognize Rip," said Dick. "Be ready for anything. I got a notion Rip is puttin' on this show, though none of 'em in there know it. Don't tip his hand."

Dick led the way into the saloon. He saw the two men at the table go tense.

The wounded man on the blankets drew in his breath with an audible sound. Timberline's bloodshot eyes narrowed, then their gaze passed Dick and fastened on Owen. For a split second the masklike expression on his long face changed. His lantern jaw sagged, then his thin-lipped mouth twisted in an ugly grin.

"Hell of a night fer seein' ghosts," Jase Timberline's nasal voice broke the silence. "Belly up to the bar, Owen. I'm thinkin' the gent with you is the Dick Smith feller. One of you was shot and burned to death. The other went down Catfish Rapids. Ghosts. Makes a man plumb spooky. It'll take a slug of forty rod to git the chill outa my carcass. I don't like ghosts worth a damn. Neither did the old woman. It drove her plumb locoed and she jumped into the river when that red moon come up. She went down Catfish Rapids."

"You plumb certain, Timberline," said Ford Marlin, "that the old squaw wasn't pushed?"

Jase Timberline winked and grinned. "Takes a Marlin to think up some ornery thing like that. Crack your jokes while you still got a live tongue, Ford. It's time Long Jim Griffin was showin' up to start the gun music. That white-whiskered ol' rock painter said the hour fer the final reckonin' was midnight. It ain't but a few minutes till twelve. Was it him as sent you two gents here tonight, Owen?"

Dick caught the flicker of a message in Rip's eye, and spoke for Owen Vickers. "It was him that sent us, Timberline."

"I figgered so. We're gittin' quite a gatherment. Too bad the squaw didn't live to see it. But when she come awake this mornin' the first thing she sighted was the white letterin' on the outside wall of the saloon. 'The hour of doom is come!' she reads. And the drunker she got the bigger them letters growed in her head, till she got to screamin' like a cougar. Then she quit screamin' and commenced a-singin' her Injun death song till a man couldn't stand it no longer. You could hear it as she went down Catfish Rapids, I tell yuh. Plain as hell." Jase Timberline took a big drink.

The whiskey peddler's nerves were jumpy. His big hand with its black nails shook as he poured more whiskey into the water tumbler he used for a bar glass.

Rip grinned faintly. Jase Timberline glared at him suspiciously, his green eyes glittering. "Whoever you are, old-timer, you ain't welcome here. Why don't you git on your horse and pull out. You got no business here."

"A man," said Rip, his voice deliberate, low-pitched, "gits lonesome for excitement. I got word that there'd be some here for a man to taste."

"You talked to that locoed ol' psalm-singer, mebby?"

Rip nodded, thumbs hooked in his two filled cartridge belts. His blue eyes were like flint. "I camped with him."

Handy was gulping down whiskey to numb his fright. Dick looked at the wounded man and grinned faintly. The man was gripping his six-shooter, fear and pain searing his bloodshot eyes. The two men at the table never took their eyes off Dick; never let their right hands get far from their guns.

There was a battered alarm clock on the back bar that ticked loudly. The hands showed a few minutes till midnight.

The Marlins kept watching the open doorway. They were waiting for Long Jim Griffin.

RIP RIPLEY leaned against the bar. His low, penetrating voice broke through the silence that had fallen suddenly. "I camped with that white whiskered ol' gent," he repeated. "Camped with him many a time, down along Pow-

der River and in the Wind River Country. I learned a lot from him. Mostly, I learned how to be patient and wait. He wasn't as locoed as a man might think. He let on to be stone deef, but he had ears like a fox. He heard a lot of talk that went on when the men that talked discounted him because they figgered he couldn't hear what they was sayin'."

"He was deef as a rock!" Jase Timberline's nasal voice was an angry snarl.

"That's what you figgered," nodded Rip. "That's what Ford and Hugh Marlin here figgered when they was drunk and got to talkin' about that Johnson County War down in Wyoming. You might recollect the night, Timberline, when they got to talkin' about Jim Jason. They'd never seen Jim Jason to know him, down in Wyoming. They wouldn't know Jim Jason now if they met him face to face. But they made a dicker with him one dark night on Powder River to kill off some enemies they had down yonder in Wyoming. The enemies was fightin' on the same side as the Marlins in the cattle war. But Ford and Hugh wanted 'em put outa the way. So they hired Jim Jason to do the job. Which he did, after a fashion. He got two outa three of the Marlin enemies. The third 'un lived. The third 'un is the man they're waitin' for tonight—Long Jim Griffin. Jim Jason killed Long Jim's daddy and his older brother. Long Jim was tough enough to git well."

"For a stranger," said Hugh Marlin, "You know too damned much. Mebby you'll side Long Jim Griffin if he has the guts to show up here—which I doubt like hell!"

"Keep your shirt tails tucked in," said Rip calmly. "Jim Griffin will show up. But he won't ask no man to side him when he gits here. That ain't Long Jim's way. He does his own fightin'. He wants the odds just the way they stand stacked ag'in' him. Besides, I reckon I'll have my own personal gun troubles to settle about that time. So will every man in this saloon.

"Take these two young fellers that just come in, Owen Vickers and Dick Smith. Jim Jason hired some tough hands to wipe out Old Man Vickers and Owen. Owen was told that he'd find them gents here at Catfish Island Crossin' tonight. Jim Jason murdered Dick Smith's daddy in Wyoming. That's what fetched Dick Smith to this place tonight. The gent yonder with the bullet in his laig was shot by Dick Smith. The two gents settin' at the table is the wounded gent's partners. I'd like to lay a bet and give odds that Dick Smith is the fastest, deadliest shot of ary man in this saloon, though he don't travel on his rep as a gun-fighter."

"You're runnin' off at the head like a magpie, mister," said Jase Timberline. "Hugh Marlin is right. You know too damned much. You pack two guns and you act like you had somethin' stickin' in your craw. What fetches you here tonight? I'm liable to make you use them two guns."

"I was comin' to that," said Rip softly. "Don't crowd me. I was speakin' of a man named Jim Jason. He was a killer down in the Johnson County Cattle War. He fought on both sides. Then he disappeared. He's supposed to be dead. But the old psalm-singer that wrote on the rocks figgered different. He was a shore queer ol' coot, lettin' on to be loco and stone deef. . . .

"That squaw of yourn, Timberline, was like all Injuns. She figgered that a crazy man was somethin' closer than ordinary humans to her Manitou. Even if he was deef, she'd talk to him in Cheyenne. Mebby she knowed he savvied how to talk and understand Injun. Anyhow she told him more than a-plenty about men that went down Catfish Rapids. About the white man, Jim Jason, who lived with the Cheyennes till things blowed over

some in Johnson County. She'd never heard of Rip Ripley, so she didn't know what she was tellin' Rip Ripley, all about this Jim Jason who murdered men and laid the blame on Rip. She told Rip Ripley that Jase Timberline's real name was Jim Jason. . . . Take a good look at me, you murderin' son-of-a-snake. Because it'll be the last face you look at this side of hell!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Wind River War-Cry

RIP RIPLEY had timed things to the split second. He had held Jase Timberline's eyes with his cold blue stare, while every man in the place had listened. Rip had seen a man's shadow just outside the open doorway.

Dick Smith and Owen had guessed by now the identity of Jase Timberline. They were alert, ready for the signal that would come from Rip. And it came with Rip's last, harshly grated words.

Rip and Jase Timberline had blazing guns in their hands as Long Jim Griffin stood in the doorway, his six-shooter spewing fire. The two Marlins were shooting at him. Owen and Dick traded shots with the three other men. The drunken stage driven dove headlong through an open window.

The din of heavy caliberd six-shooters was terrific. Powdersmoke hung in layers, in the dim yellow lamplight, as men died there. Rip and Owen and Dick Smith had their backs to the wall, smoking guns in their hands.

Ford Marlin was dead. Hugh Marlin and Jim Griffin, both down, fired at one another as they lay on the blood smeared floor. Hugh Marlin rolled over on his back, shot square between the eyes. Long Jim Griffin, lying on his side, tried to say some last words but only blood spilled from his mouth. Two of Timberline's hired killers were dead. The other was begging for mercy.

Owen had been shot in the leg. A bullet had torn through Dick's shoulder. Rip Ripley was wounded badly. Blood trickled from his tight-lipped mouth. Death was glazing the brightness of his sapphire blue eyes as he walked behind the bar, grinned coldly down at the dead body of Jase Timberline, alias Jim Jason.

Rip laid his empty guns on the bar and slumped into a chair as Dick and Owen supported him.

"I'm pullin' out for the Big Range, boys," he smiled at them. "I got my job done here. Take good care of my horses. It's all I got to leave you. One apiece. Dick, I want you to have the Bible. It's a good book to go by. I hope God will forgive me if I misused it to track down Jim Jason."

Rip Ripley's eyes closed. And it was as if a weary old man had closed his eyes and gone to sleep. . . .

"He believed in that Bible," said Dick, his voice husky. "Rip was no hypocrite. I'm giving it to Helen. Your mother's name is on the flyleaf. Rip picked it up at your dad's ranch in Wyoming the mornin' your father and mine and Rip found her murdered. They all took an oath on that Bible that mornin' to track down Jim Jason and kill him where they found him. But Rip was the man who paid off your mother's debt and the debt of many another person. Rip must have forgot about Helen. He'd want her to have her mother's bible."

Owen nodded. Save for the wounded man who lay moaning and gritting his teeth, they were the only survivors.

From outside came the pounding of shod hoofs and a blustering voice called out a command. The shaky voice of the stage driver, Handy, gave back some inarticulate reply.

"That," grinned Dick Smith faintly, "will be Sheriff Mark Huggins, who al-

ways gits his man. He said he was arrestin' the survivors of this gun-scrap at Catfish Island Crossin'. That'll be you and me. Git ready for the handcuffs, Owen."

The big bulk of the sheriff filled the doorway. He had a six-shooter in one hand, a letter in the other. The stage driver was right behind the peace officer, talking so fast that his words stumbled over his tongue.

"That's him, Sheriff," Handy pointed to Dick. "That's the feller that saved the Dry Gulch Mine payroll. That wounded feller on the pile of sougans will testify in court. Dick Smith and Owen Vickers killed the other two that was goin' to throw me into Catfish Rapids. That's the letter Dick Smith wrote you and said to give to you. Timberline stopped me here and taken away my prisoner. That's Dick Smith. If he's an outlaw, then I'm a tee-totalin' preacher!"

Mark Huggins stared at the bloody shambles, his eyes wide with awe. He looked at Owen Vickers, then studied Dick, a puzzled frown puckering his brows. "It was Jase Timberline that pointed you out to me at Dry Gulch," the sheriff told Dick. "You didn't see Jase, but he was in town. He said you'd stopped once at his place. That you was one of the Wind River Gang of outlaws."

"The Wind River Gang," said Dick, "weren't outlaws, Sheriff. They were small ranchers in Johnson County, Wyoming, who got run out durin' the cattle war—men like Old Man Vickers and my father and a few more. They're all dead now. Rip Ripley was the last of the old Wind River Gang, unless you count me. Down in New Mexico where I live, I'm considered a law abidin' cowman.

"What you see here, Sheriff, is the end of a feud that began down in that Wyoming cattle war. Long Jim Griffin and the Marlins shot it out. They were all three tough hands. They died with their boots on and their guns a-smokin'."

Owen nodded. "Long Jim Griffin was worth a corral full of Marlins. He was a killer that did his own gun-work instead of hirin' men to do the job for him. It was Long Jim who spied on Jase Timberline from Catfish Island. Timberline was with the three men that burned our ranch and killed my dad. When their job was done, they hightailed it for Timberline's place. Jase Timberline was ridin' a Flying V horse. The horse was a bad swimmer. Timberline had to quit him in the middle of the river and swim ashore. The horse landed on Catfish Island, winded but still as sound as ever. The horse was still wearin' Jase Timberline's saddle.

"Long Jim Griffin was on Catfish Island that night. He had come over to the island by rowboat. He had hauled the boat partly up on the bank but the current had pulled it into the water durin' the night, leavin' him afoot. That's what Long Jim Griffin told me when he had me tied to the tree, Dick. But I only half believed him, so I didn't tell you. That Flyin' V horse and Jim Jason's saddle had landed on the island by accident. It sounded too fishy to be true, but now I know that Long Jim Griffin wasn't lyin'."

"The man you knew as Jase Timberline," Dick Smith told the sheriff, "is in behind the bar, plenty weighted down with bullets. His real name, like as not, is Jase Timberline, but down in Wyoming he was Jim Jason. There should be a big bounty on his scalp. You're plumb welcome to it, Sheriff. Nobody else wants to claim it. The man who killed him is dead. Rip Ripley. As square a man as ever fought for a friend. I don't suppose you've got a doctor in your posse?"

"I have. He's at camp. I'll send for him. You and Owen Vickers look like you needed mendin'."

"No bones broke," said Dick, "but we could stand patchin'. We've got to ride

to Sun Prairie. Handy will turn back from here. He's takin' Rip Ripley's body to Sun Prairie for burial."

The doctor was also the coroner of Dry Gulch. In the dark hour before dawn he held an inquest. It was brief, grim.

The body of Long Jim Griffin would be buried at the Rafter G ranch. The bodies of Ford and Hugh Marlin would find graves at their Rolling M headquarters ranch. The two dead outlaws would be buried here at Catfish Island Crossing.

The bullet-riddled body of Jase Timberline was wrapped in a tarp and weighted with scrap iron. It was placed in the river-man's rowboat and set adrift. With the blood red moon hanging low in a black sky, the men on the bank stood silent. The swift current caught the boat and its grisly cargo. They heard the splintering crash as it hit the jagged rocks of Catfish Rapids. It would be splintered to kindling wood before it had gone far.

Old Handy was a little tipsy. Afterwards, when relating the tale, he would describe the black night, the blood-red moon, the crashing of the boat as it hit the rocks of Catfish Rapids. And he would swear that he heard, mingled with the roar of the rapids, the death wail of Jase Timberline's squaw.

At sunrise the four-horse stage coach carrying the dead body of old Rip Ripley pulled out for Sun Prairie. Rip would be buried alongside Old Man Vicker's grave. Some day, Dick told Owen, he would move his father's bones to Montana, so that the three men who had been partners on earth might be buried alongside one another.

Owen and Dick, each riding one of old Rip's sleek bays that had, by painstaking padding, not been collar marked from drawing the canvas-topped wagon, rode ahead of the stagecoach. In Dick's pocket was the Bible that had belonged to Owen and Helen's mother.

Tomorrow Dick Smith would stand beside the open grave and read from the Book that had been the old cowpuncher's prized possession, the Bible upon which three men had taken a solemn oath of vengeance. And a few days later a preacher would use that same Bible when Helen Vickers and Dick Smith stood before him.

Owen and Dick rode along at an easy gait, each wrapped in his own thoughts. They bore the pain of their wounds with the stoical manner of their cowpuncher breed.

Handy had managed to smuggle a jug of Jase Timberline's forty-rod whiskey into the boot of the stage coach. Mellowed now by the potent corn liquor, he sang as he drove his four horses along the winding, rutted road. His voice, creaky as the leather hinges of his coach, sounded above the rattle of tug chains:

*"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie-ee—"*

THE END

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# SOLD FOR BLOOD —AND HOT LEAD!

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

Thrusting the girl aside, Asher turned toward Jeff.

**If Jeff Ware sold his spread to the range-grabbing gunman, Brad Asher, that meant the end of everything for Jeff's girl and her hard-pressed rancher dad. Yet, loving her above all else, he must condemn her to misery and her dad to death!**

STANDING beside his three room cabin, his gaze narrowed, Jeff Ware watched Brad Asher ride in from the high, sage-stippled flat. Asher wheeled his running horse around the corral, the sun at his back and his huge shadow racing before him. He pulled up with a brutal jerk on the reins, heaved his great body down from the saddle. For an instant he glared at Jeff, domineering, truculent, then words bolted from his mouth in a harsh impatient rush.

"All right, Ware!" he blustered. "I'm making you one more offer, but I'm telling you now that it's my last!"

Jeff Ware shook his head slowly. Every line of his tall hard body, of his lean weathered face, was stubborn. He said, "Save your breath, Brad."

"Six thousand!" roared Asher. *"Six*

thousand! That's what I'm offering you. It's three times what this broomtail spread of yours is worth, and you know it!"

"Maybe to me," Jeff countered. "But for you it's a hole card worth a fortune. And if I gave you that hole card, knowing what you aim to do with it, I would not be able to rest easy, or call myself a man. Get this straight, Brad. I'm not selling out, not for any price."

"Listen," blared Asher. "You can't sit on the fence any longer! You've either got to string with me, or Dan Pope. And you blamed well know it. Refuse me now, and it means you're backing Pope."

Jeff shrugged. "Figure it any way you want."

"That's all I wanted to know!" Asher whirled suddenly, leaped up on his rearing horse. "I'm through talking medicine with you, Ware. I'll smash Pope, and when I do, I'll smash you too!" Then he was gone, with a roar of hoofs, a great cloud of dust rolling up behind him.

The man was like an avalanche, Jeff thought, thundering straight ahead to his destination, blindly smashing and crushing and pulverizing every obstacle that stood in his way.

EARLY that night, Jeff Ware rode down to the great valley below. Swinging off his horse, beneath the rustling cottonwoods in Dan Pope's ranchyard, he walked toward the long gallery-roofed porch. From the darkness there, a pleasant voice rose to greet him, "Hello, Jeff."

He said, "Hello, Rita," stepped up on the porch, and sat in a chair beside her. "Where's your father?" he asked.

"Gone to town," replied the girl. "He said he wouldn't be long."

Jeff rolled and lit a cigarette. In the pale starlight, the girl beside him was only a dim silhouette. Yet he could sense plainly every slender line of her lovely young person, the pretty oval face, the spun-gold hair and laughing blue eyes. Long ago, something within him had memorized her. He said, "Asher was up to see me today."

The girl's head turned toward him quickly. "He tried again to buy you out?"

"Offered me six thousand," Jeff admitted.

"That's—a lot of money," murmured the girl. "Jeff, are you going to sell out to Asher?"

He looked at her oddly. "Rita," he said, "there's something I've got to tell you. For two years, since the first time I set eyes on you, I've known you were the only woman I could ever want for a wife. What I mean—will you marry me?"

The girl stared at him. She seemed suddenly startled, even shocked. After a long moment she spoke, ignoring the question he had asked. "Brad Asher," she said, "is determined to own this whole valley. He'll stop at nothing to get it. It's become a blind, brute passion with him. He's sucked in all the smaller ranches, like—like an octopus. Only dad still stands in his way. And every drop of water dad has springs up there on the flat, on your ranch. If you sold out to Asher he'd cut off dad's water and have him ruined in less than six months."

"Yes," Jeff agreed, "he'd do just that."

"If I marry you," Rita asked, "you'll not sell out to Asher?"

"Of course not," Jeff promised; "that's understood."

Rita said sharply, with sudden bitterness: "Well, I won't marry you. I—I hate you!"

Had she slapped his face it couldn't have stung more. He was suddenly and completely bewildered, not so much by her refusal as by the biting scorn, even hatred, in her voice. He said blankly, "Why—I never guessed you felt that way about me, Rita."

"And now, of course," she added wearily, "you'll sell out to Asher."

"Don't be foolish," he said, a little shortly. "I've already told Asher he couldn't have my place at any price. It's my self-respect he was trying to buy, and that's not for sale, not now or ever. You can tell Dan I said so." He stood up. "Now I reckon I better be going."

The girl too had risen swiftly. She was staring at him with a sort of blank surprise. Even in the dark he saw that her eyes had gone wide with wonder. "Rita!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

She gave a choked little sob. Then suddenly, to his complete amazement, she flung herself forward, into his arms, clung to him almost desperately. Her pale face lifted blindly, her lips seeking his, burning against them with a wild sweet passion. After a long moment she leaned back in his arms, gazing up, breathing rapidly.

"Jeff," she whispered, "don't you see? I've loved you too, as long, I guess, as you have me. But the way you just asked me to marry you, as if you would sell out to Asher if I refused, like you were—just *buying* me, *bargaining* for me. It made me furious. I—thought I hated you."

"Child, child," he chided. "I asked you that way only to show you how much you meant to me, that I was on your side, had to be no matter what the cost, that I would do anything I could do for you whether you married me or not. I thought you *knew* I wouldn't sell out to Asher."

"I know now. It—it was *wicked* of me to believe anything else, even for a minute." She clung to him again, her face against his shoulder. "Jeff," she promised, "I will never distrust you again."

Within twenty-four hours Jeff Ware was to remember that promise, as he stood bleak and helpless before this girl's loathing scorn, her complete and final contempt, her bitter hatred.

ABOUT noon the next day, Jeff rode home from a long circle, hazing before him half a dozen cows and their bawling calves. Turning the calves into his big corral, he built a branding fire, began roping and throwing the dodging little critters, slapping on each his hot iron. It was hard, dusty work, the smell of singed hair and smoke blending acridly with an all-pervading scent of sun-scorched sage.

Pausing once to rest, he gazed out across the heat-glittering flat. A few grazing bunches of cattle served only to emphasize its lonely enormity. Far to the west, snow-capped peaks made a remote silvery flash against a tremendous indigo vault of sky. It seemed suddenly incongruous that, in such a mighty land, men must still lock horns over a few paltry acres, make of the land an excuse for the release of ancient combative instincts, ambition, greed, honor, love. He told himself again that Dan Pope was in the right, that self-respect demanded he side with Dan. Yet he wondered if he actually would, were it not for Rita. He didn't know. He shrugged and turned back to his work, pulling a hot iron from the fire.

Then, minutes later, just as he sent the last bawling calf bucking from the corral, to be met and anxiously sniffed over by its waiting, outraged mother, he heard a deepening drum of approaching hoofs. Glancing up, he saw Rita Pope racing in across the flat, riding at breakneck speed.

As he ran from the corral, startled, she whirled into the ranch-yard, swung from her horse in a quick lithe leap. Clad boyishly in jeans and a man's shirt, a big sombrero jammed over her tawny hair, she was gasping for breath, her blue eyes wide with shock and fright.

"Jeff," she cried, "they've arrested dad!"

"*Arrested* him?" Jeff exclaimed. "Who? What for? When?"

"The sheriff! This morning! They claim dad killed Lew Carter!"

"Carter?" echoed Jeff. "You mean Brad Asher's foreman? Wait now; start at the beginning and tell it straight."

The girl controlled herself with an effort and spoke more calmly. "Dad didn't get home from town until late last night. It seems he quarreled with Carter in the Palace Saloon. You know how hot-tempered dad is. He ordered Carter to stay off his range, and Carter answered something insulting. Dad tried to hit him, but the saloon crowd separated them. Then Carter departed, with dad shouting he'd like to shoot him. A few minutes later dad left, supposedly for home, but still angry. This morning, Carter's body was found just outside of town, shot in the back. The sheriff came right out, charged dad with murder and took him to jail."

For an instant Jeff stared at the ground, then looked up. "Rita," he asked, "did Dan really kill him?"

The girl's eyes were distracted, frightened. "Jeff," she whispered, "I don't know. I don't want to believe it. But dad has such a temper. Asher and Carter have given him so much cause, goaded him—I mean—"

Jeff sighed. "Anyway, Rita, they haven't much of a case against him. Just because he threatened Carter doesn't prove he killed him. There weren't any witnesses, and—"

"Wait," interrupted Rita. "I haven't told you everything. You know that revolver of dad's, that he always carries, the one made in Germany?"

Jeff started. "The Luger?"

Rita nodded swiftly. "It's a curiosity; everybody knows dad has the only gun like that around here, and it seems they can tell by the bullet found in Carter what kind of a gun was used to kill him."

"You mean—" Jeff stared.

Rita gave a little moan, nodded. "Carter was killed with a Luger, and dad's gun is the only Luger in this part of the country."

Jeff wheeled around abruptly. "I'm going to saddle up," he said. "We'll go right to town. I want to see Dan and get hold of a lawyer."

JEFF wanted to see Sheriff Tim Bascomb alone. He asked Rita to wait outside. Bascomb was lounging in a chair behind his desk, a tall sparse man, middle-aged, with iron-gray hair and mustache, his colorless gaze cold with a constant skepticism.

Jeff closed the door. "Now," he asked, "what's all this foolishness about Dan killing Carter?"

"No foolishness," Bascomb replied. "Carter was killed with a Luger, and Dan Pope's got the only gun like it in this part of the country."

"But even if Dan did kill him," Jeff protested, "Carter gave him plenty of cause."

"That's up to a judge and jury," countered Bascomb. "My job was to arrest him. At that, I think he'll hang."

"Yet if they'd shot it out in the street," Jeff reasoned, "and Dan claimed self-defense, you'd never have arrested him."

Bascomb shrugged. "That wasn't how it happened."

The man was inflexible, a rigid adherent to the code of this new country, exonerating the survivor of any admitted gun duel, but labeling any other killing a murder.

"Well," Jeff asked, "can I see Dan? Alone?"

"If you wish." Bascomb stood up, motioned with his head. "Come along."

He led the way into a rear room, where several large steel cages were bolted to the floor. In the only occupied one, Rita's father, huge and gray-bearded, his old blue eyes as fiercely glaring as an eagle's, paced angrily back and forth. Bascomb let Jeff inside, locked the door again and left them alone.

Jeff grinned. "No use walking so much, Dan," he advised. "You're not going any place."

Dan Pope grunted, sat down on the edge of a narrow cot. "Locking me up!" he snorted. "I ought to have the law on 'em!"

"Seems like it's the other way around,"

observed Jeff. "Aren't they treating you well, Dan?"

"Huh! Leastwise they ain't taking no chances on me getting robbed. They keep all the doors locked."

"Oh, by the way," Jeff asked. "Did you kill Carter?"

"Hell, no!"

"Then who did?"

Dan shrugged. "How do I know? I locked horns with Carter in the saloon and threatened him. But that's all. Afterward, I went straight home."

"He was shot with a Luger," Jeff reminded.

"But not mine!" barked Dan. "Somebody else around here has one of them Lugers."

Jeff looked surprised. "How do you know that?"

"Hell!" Dan roared. "If he was shot with a Luger, and I didn't do it, then somebody else *must* have one!"

"You're still sure you didn't do it?"

The old cowman looked disgusted. "Ain't even *you* got any sense? See here, Jeff, how was Carter shot; where'd the bullet hit him?"

"Right between the shoulder blades."

"Sure!" thundered Dan. "In the back! Well, would *I* shoot any man in the back?"

Jeff blinked and grinned sheepishly. "That's right, Dan," he admitted. "I hadn't thought of it that way. No, you wouldn't shoot a man in the back. You'd be quick enough, if you felt like it, to let him have it in a fair fight; but you wouldn't kill a man from behind. All right, you didn't kill Carter. But making me believe it, and convincing a judge and jury, are two different things."

"Don't I know it," growled Dan.

"And there's something else," Jeff continued. "This is just the break Brad Asher's been waiting for. He'd do anything to wipe you out, and now, with you locked up and helpless, he's almost certain to make his play."

Dan nodded. "That's just why I want to get out of this coop, pronto. And remember, son, Asher still figures that hill ranch of yours, with its water control, can be his trump card. When he strikes it's most likely to be through you, so watch out."

Jeff shrugged. "I'm not wearing any blinders. Sam Varlin's your lawyer; I'm going now to see him."

"All right," conceded Dan. "But just the same I'd rather have a gun; give me a gun and I wouldn't need a lawyer!"

JEFF joined Rita outside. They walked up the wooden sidewalk to Sam Varlin's small office. He stepped aside to let Rita enter first, and, that same instant, suddenly saw Brad Asher ghost out of a doorway some three hundred feet ahead.

Asher stood in the middle of the sidewalk, staring silently. There was something so deliberate and premeditated in the mammoth rancher's pose, that Jeff's head swung almost instinctively, glancing behind. A second man had appeared an equal distance down the sidewalk, and out of a store doorway, directly across the street, stepped a third. They were both Asher riders, gunhands.

Instantly, finding himself centering that ominous triangle, Jeff knew a trap was being set; that when he left the lawyer's office that trap would be sprung. For the moment, however, there was nothing he could do about it, so he turned quickly into Varlin's office, following Rita.

From behind his cluttered desk Sam Varlin gazed up at them gloomily. He was a small, chubby man, with a shining bald head, a round moon face, and slowly blinking eyes, magnified by steel-rimmed spectacles into enormous owlish orbs. He sighed and said, "Jeff, Miss Rita; I know why you're here, of course. Why in tarnation didn't Dan have sense enough to use an ordinary gun? That Luger—tut, tut!"

"My father's innocent," declared Rita.

The lawyer smiled tolerantly. "Yes, yes. We must assume that in court, of course. But we three need have no secrets between us—in strictest confidence, of course."

"Sam," Jeff said, "Dan didn't kill him."

The lawyer scowled. drummed impatiently on the desk with his finger-tips. "Now, now," he chided. "We must all cooperate, Jeff. As I say, in strictest confidence. But after all, that Luger—"

"Carter was ambushed," Jeff said. "Shot in the back. Would Dan Pope do that?"

The lawyer's head came up; his enormous eyes batted rapidly behind the spectacles. "Why, why," he stammered, "I never thought of that."

"Then think of it now," Jeff retorted. "Dan Pope may be a hothead, but he'd die before shooting any other man in the back, and you know it, Sam."

"You're right!" Varlin stared at his desk, then shook his bald head sadly. "But I wish you'd never told me," he mourned. "Always can prove a man innocent easier then if I know he's guilty. That Luger—"

"Somebody else around here has a Luger," Jeff stated.

"Who?"

"I don't know. Not yet." Jeff bent his head and began to roll a cigarette. Suddenly he crushed it in his fist, dropped it to the floor. He looked up and his eyes were bleak and cold.

"Wait here, Rita," he said. "Tell Sam what he wants to know. I'm going outside a minute." He wheeled abruptly, and walked out of the office, closing the door.

Just as he had suspected, Brad Asher had moved closer and was standing now, less than twenty feet away, grinning coldly. The two other gunmen still held their original positions, one behind, the other directly across the street.

"Hello, Brad," Jeff said. "Planning a little murder?"

"Maybe," Asher coolly retorted. "That depends on you."

"Yes? How so?"

"Well," Asher said, "I'm buying your ranch. Right now. But not for any six thousand; all you get now is a hundred dollars. I've got the cash with me, a paper all made out. All you have to do is sign your name and take the money, then leave these parts forever."

"And if I tell you to go to hell?"

Asher shrugged. "Then I give a signal, and you'll be shot from behind and across the street, cut to pieces before you can ever touch your gun. But it won't be with me like it is with Dan Pope. He ambushed a man, shot him in the dark, and that's murder. But we'll swear you picked a fight, went for your gun, that we shot you in self-defense."

Asher wasn't bluffing; Jeff knew that. Stepping into this trap deliberately, trying to verify a hunch, he knew now what his course must be.

"Brad," he said, "you win."

Just then, the door of Sam Varlin's office swung open. Jeff was suddenly aware that Rita stood there, staring bewilderedly. It made what he had to do harder, yet he forced himself to speak on smoothly.

"I'll sell you the ranch," he told Asher. "I was a fool, Brad, not to side with you in the first place. But now I aim to save my own skin, take what I can and get out. Let's have that paper."

He heard Rita's amazed gasp as Asher handed him the document and a pencil. He didn't look at her. Turning half around, he laid the paper against the building wall, scrawled his name. He handed it back to Asher, and Asher gave him the money. Rita spoke then, suddenly, bitterly disillusioned scorn in her voice.

"You coward," she said. "You contemptible coward. You—you traitor!" She gave him a choked sob, stepped backward into Varlin's office, slammed the door.

Asher shrugged. "Now get on your horse," he ordered Jeff, "and get out of the country. Don't ever show your face in these parts again."

Jeff walked up the street to his horse. He climbed into the saddle and rode out of town.

AT TEN o'clock that night, Brad Asher's riders were asleep in the bunkhouse. In the big ranchhouse, Asher was still awake. He was hunched before a roll-top desk, adding a column of figures, in the small room he used as an office. The door behind him, an outside door, was closed.

Suddenly, Asher's pencil paused. Against his back, like a ghostly breath, had come a chill current of air. He spun around in his chair abruptly, then jerked motionless. The door had swung open. Standing there, holding a leveled six-shooter, was Jeff Ware.

"Brad," Jeff said, "it's just like this afternoon—except now it's me, and not you, that's holding a pat hand."

Asher was watching him warily. "What d'you want?"

"A Luger pistol."

"A—Luger? I havent't got any Luger."

"Well, that's too bad," Jeff said. "Because unless you can give me a Luger I'm going to shoot you."

"Don't be a fool!" Asher blared. "I tell you I haven't a Luger!"

"Quit bluffing," Jeff snapped. "When Dan Pope got jailed it looked like a perfect break for you. Too perfect, I figure, to have been an accident. You knew Dan was supposed to have the only Luger around here, so you got one yourself, waited for a chance to use it to frame Dan. The chance came last night when Dan quarreled with Carter in the saloon. You killed your own foreman, Asher. And you did it with a Luger so Dan would get the blame, be put away while you finished up this business of ruining both him and me. Well, I aim to produce that second Luger. It'll bust the case against Dan wide open."

Asher glared, shook his head. "You can't bluff me."

"I'm not bluffing," Jeff said. "No more than you were this afternoon. Remember, Brad, you taught me how to do this." He lifted his gun slightly. "Either produce that Luger, or get shot. Time's up."

"Hold it!" For another instant Asher hesitated, staring. Then he shrugged. "You mean it, eh? All right. Here it is." He reached backard with his left hand and opened a desk drawer.

"Lift it by the barrel," Jeff warned. "Hand it to me, butt first."

Coolly, Asher lifted a Luger pistol from the drawer, extended it, grips first. Jeff stepped forward and seized it, but Asher didn't let go. Instead, he tugged violently, at the same instant slapping Jeff's six-shooter aside with his free hand, grabbing it by the barrel, even as it blazed. Both men flung backward so violently that they broke free, each wresting a gun from the other, Asher now holding Jeff's six-shooter, Jeff whipping up the Luger. He rushed backward toward the open door, pulling the trigger. But the Luger failed to fire—it was empty!

Asher had already lunged up from his chair. He fired just as Jeff gained the door. The bullet struck shatteringly agains Jeff's left shoulder. It knocked him backward, literally blasted him out of the room. Somehow, he held his feet, staggered around, plunged across the ranchyard to where he had left his horse, just beyond the corrals. Shouts came from Asher's awakened riders in the bunkhouse. Desperately, Jeff pulled himself into the saddle. Still clutching the unloaded Luger, he wheeled, raced furiously away through the darkness.

Asher's riders would already be saddling up, he knew, racing after him, out for murder. He had hoped to take the

Luger directly to Sheriff Bascomb. But his wound was pouring blood. He was sick and dizzy. He knew he would lose consciousness long before reaching town, be found and killed by Asher's searching riders. His one chance was the Pope ranch. But this was the slack season, Dan's riders were in scattered line-camps, and Rita, except for the Chinese cook, was alone. And how could he ever expect Rita to believe him now, after his apparently deliberate betrayal of her this afternoon?

As he reined up in the Pope ranchyard, half an hour later, he was only half-conscious. He slid from the blowing horse, staggered toward the darkened house. Waves of blackness kept breaking across his brain. Leaning against the door, he lifted his fist and pounded weakly. Again and again he banged.

An eternity seemed to pass before he finally heard a movement inside. Then the door swung open, and Rita, a blanket wrapped around her nightgown, holding a lighted lamp above her sleep-tousled yellow hair, stared out. Her eyes flared. She drew back sharply.

"*You?* I won't talk to you. I don't want to see you again, ever. Go *away!*"

He lifted a wavering hand toward her. "Rita—I'm shot—send for the sheriff—get him right away—"

Then the floor of the room seemed to fly up and strike him in the face. Everything went black.

A LONG time later, Jeff opened his eyes. He found he had been taken into a small room adjoining the Pope kitchen, that he was stretched on a blanket on the floor. His wound was bandaged, the bleeding stopped. Dawn was already pressing grayly against the windows. He felt weak, his shoulder aching, but his head was clear. Rita must have bandaged his wound. But had she trusted him enough to go for the sheriff, or send the Chinese cook? Suddenly he heard voices, in the adjoining kitchen. One was Rita's and the other—the other was Brad Asher's! He heard Asher's voice lift in harsh anger:

"We scattered, trying to find the polecat. I cut his trail an hour ago, worked it out to here. He's in this house, and I know it!"

Rita said something in protest, too tensely low for Jeff to hear, and Asher blared: "Then I'll find him myself! Out of my way, you!"

Jeff struggled to his feet, swaying unsteadily for an instant. The Luger was still thrust into his waistband. But it was empty, useless. Wounded, unarmed, he had nothing with which to fight but his bare hands.

From the kitchen Asher shouted again, "Out of my way!" Then there was the sudden sound of scuffling, and Rita gave a sharp cry of pain. Asher had hurt her, dared to hurt her!

Anger flamed in Jeff, coursed through his weakened body in a wild surge of strength. He flung himself at the door, ripped it open and plunged into the kitchen. Asher was struggling with Rita in the center of the room, where she had flung herself upon him in her last desperate effort to keep him from finding Jeff. Now he saw Jeff, thrust the girl aside, and rushed suddenly backward. He grabbed for his gun.

"You fool!" he screamed hoarsely. "You meddling fool! Sure I killed Carter, and now you'll die too!"

Jeff leaped straight at him. Asher's gun came driving up, but Rita, hurling back against him just as the weapon crashed, diverted his aim. Then Jeff was upon him, grabbing his wrist, shoving that gun upward. He wrenched violently as he felt Asher's knee drive sickeningly into the pit of his stomach. The gun twisted sharply, causing Asher's finger to pull the trigger as the muzzle spun downward,

and again it thundered. Powder burned Jeff's face.

Then he saw Asher's great body go suddenly limp. It fell backward, hitting the floor with a shuddering thud. Jeff stared blankly. Asher's gun, spinning around as he wrenched the man's wrist, had blasted a bullet into the side of the huge cattleman's head.

Jeff staggered aside, leaned gasping against the wall. Only then did he realize that another man had plunged into the room. It was Sheriff Bascomb.

"I couldn't shoot for fear of hitting you, Jeff," Bascomb explained. "Got here as fast as I could after Miss Rita sent her cook for me. Anyway—I was in time to hear Asher admit killing Carter."

JEFF'S wound healed rapidly. He stood on Dan Pope's porch one early evening, a week later, with Rita, gazing out across those vast purpling leagues of lonely range. "I saw Sheriff Bascomb today," Jeff was saying. "He told me the sale of my ranch to Asher is void on account of Asher extorting it on threat of violence. I had a hunch from the beginning, Rita, that Asher had killed Carter. But I couldn't have proved it if I was dead. I mean that's why I backed down to Asher and sold out. I figured if I didn't I'd likely be killed, and then I couldn't have done anything to help either you or Dan."

"A weaker man might have gone down fighting," Rita said. "It took greater strength then *not* to fight. You really proved your courage, Jeff, just by giving in to Asher, even by seeming to run away."

"You figured I was a coward and a traitor," Jeff remembered. "That was what you called me. Yet that night when I came to you wounded, you still trusted me, did everything you could to help me."

"I didn't intend to," Rita confessed. "I did it only because I had to, because I couldn't do anything else."

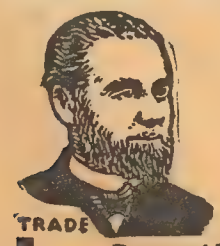
"Why?"

"Because my heart made me, of course. What a silly question?" She turned away from him, gazed out across the range.

Jeff said, "Rita." He stepped over to her, pressed his lips gently to the back of her neck. Just then old Dan Pope stalked out on the porch. "You, Jeff!" he bellowed. "Don't you ever let me catch you doing that again!"

Both Rita and Jeff whirled around, staring. "Look here, Dan," Jeff protested. "Me and Rita are going to get married."

"Sure, sure!" boomed Dan. "I got no kick about that. But when a man's got to shoot another he shouldn't do it from behind; he should meet him face to face, give him a chance to shoot right back. Kissing a woman's the same. Don't sneak up behind her. Stand in front of her like a man, Jeff, so if she's got the notion, she can kiss right back!"

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# DOUBLE-OR-NOTHING

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

**As reward for sweating years of honest work and high-flung hopes, young Vic Walton, poverty rancher, saw everything he'd slaved and fought for brought to red, flaming ruin. Then came the grim solution to his tragedy: A quick gun, a fast horse—and to hell with the other fellow!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### No Chance for a Cowman

VIC WALTON spat on his muscular hands, wrapped long fingers about the ax haft and swung. The bitt sliced keenly through the length of a short log, splitting it cleanly. The ring of the stroke echoed through the timber aisles and Vic tossed the tool aside to heave the split fuel atop a neat pile ranged alongside the log ranchhouse.

Smiling, he mopped his brow and stepped back to survey his work. The job

# COWMAN

## Thrilling Novelette of the Open Ranges

Reno's horse, struck fatally, reared back. . . .

was done and he glanced aloft at the lowering sky that had hidden the crests of Indian Peaks for a week past. The promise of deep snow and bitter blasts lurked in that leaden vista, but Vic laughed at it now.

"You can let loose any time," he laughed at the silence. "You can pile your cold snow to the eaves when you're ready. We're fixed for you!"

Pride brightened his face as he ran his eyes over the tight log house, the stout barn and the crazy-pole corral enclosing the lush meadow beyond. Some day, he reflected, he would add to it all. A roomier house for the girl he would fetch someday to share the spread; a bigger barn, more corrals. But this was a fair start, a comfortable haven for him and his dad to winter in.

True, there had been other starts before this. Vic could hardly recall a year that old Tom Walton hadn't started some projects doomed to failure at the outset because of the restlessness and impatience of his sire. Those failures had left their mark upon Old Tom. He had grown dour and pessimistic these last years, forever

ranting on the uselessness of honest struggle. His words came back to Vic now.

"What's it all earned me? Gray hairs, a bent back an' the right to eat the raw-hide off my saddle. I've worked for a hundred outfits, seems like, helpin' 'em to get rich. An' what have I got to show for it?"

Vic had never ceased to argue with him. Time and again, he had said: "Ever stop to think it might be you, yourself, Dad? I tell you, this goin' from job to job is no good. The gents who stick with one outfit are the ones who come out on top. An' if a man can't do that, he better get him a little place an' stick to that."

"Yeah." old Tom's cynical answer had always been the same. "Stick to one boss, give him the best years of your life in the hope of becomin' ramrod, at seventy-five a month. Then the boss sells out or the brand goes belly-up an' where are you at? As for startin' an outfit of yore own, all that buys you is the enmity of every established outfit an' the pleasure of starvin' to death while you wait for yore two pore cows to grow into a herd."

"The game can be beat—honest," Vic had responded, when they had taken over this little outfit in the Cedar Breaks. And he repeated that credo of confidence now, tight-lipped. "The game can be beat—honest!"

Vic was turning twenty-one, a man grown. He was strong of body, eager for the test of life, and clear thinking to a degree calculated to make up for the lack of balance in his sire. Here on the free, untrammeled range, he promised, he would carve out success and prove Tom Walton wrong. Nothing could stop him. Nothing.

Vic filled his lungs with the stinging, piney odor of the wood pile and reached for his jacket. Then, for the first time, he was aware of his ravenous appetite. It had been eight hours since he had eaten in the gray dawn, eight hours of ceaseless toil. There was little enough in the house to eat, but he felt the need of such as there was. There would be little to do for several months. Hunting and trapping could be undertaken now, and soon there would be meat aplenty hanging in the lean-to cool house and Old Tom would be bring back flour and spuds and other staples for their comfort during snow-bound days and bitter nights.

Vic moved toward the door, habit drawing his glance to the stretch of the far road for sign of his father. There was none. But the old man would be along tomorrow at latest, with a pair of loaded ponies and a score of whiteface breeders that they had slaved and saved to buy. Vic smiled as he thought of hogtying those critters, venting their marks and burning them with their Flying W, right ribs, swallowfork the left ear, underbit the right.

He went inside, where gloom shrouded the big living room, with its stone hearth and wall-hung bunks. Beyond, in the smaller kitchen, he laid a fire in the square stove then cast a glance out the window, from which one had a broad view of the swelling, cedar-studded range falling away toward the Peacepipe Basin. It was a scene he never tired of looking at, but it held no pleasure for him now. For coming through the scattered timber, roweling his pony hard, was Tom Walton. Before him were no pack horses, no leg-weary cattle. Vic knew that behind him rode instead, some terror that drove him headlong toward the cabin.

VIC darted outside, clearing the threshold just as his sire curbed the reeling pony cruelly and swung down. For a long moment he stood there looking at his boy with haunting, harried eyes. His face was stubbled, stained and gray. His morose lips curved downward forlornly as he swallowed hard.

"Quick, boy! Gather yore possibles

while I screw rigs on a couple fresh ponies. We're quittin' here sudden."

A cold tide poured through Vic and he hardly recognized the strained timbre of his own voice. "Quittin'? Why? What's wrong? Do you mean we're ridin' away from here an' leavin' all this?" His arm swung to encompass work that was his full and lusty pride.

"Don't stand there runnin' off at the head!" Tom Walton's voice rose to a high pitch of desperation. "We've gotta get goin'. They'll be here any minute now." He was lumbering swiftly toward the barn, leading his spent mount.

"Who's gonna be here?" Vic fired after him.

"A bloodsweatin' posse from Peacepipe City!" Old Tom flung back. "I—I killed a man!"

Vic felt the ice form inside his stomach and a bitter virus pour through him sickeningly. For a moment anger had its cruel way with him, anger against a reckless old man who had turned another dream into curds of failure. If Old Tom had heedlessly killed a man and would run from this—their first real haven after years of battering—let him run.

"I'm damned if I leave it!" Vic swore.

Then came his father's dry answer, muffled by the barn walls. "You better—with a prayer fer God to speed you. 'Cause that posse ain't gonna be a bit particular who they hang—by the name uh Walton!"

It was a clinching argument. Vic caught his breath and ducked into the house. He lifted his gun belt from a peg, wrapped it about him. He poured himself into a heavy sheepskin coat, caught up his saddle gun from a corner and stepped out just as Old Tom came riding up, leading a spare. He was staring intently down through the cedars and his voice held a note of fear.

"Hurry, Vic! Yonder they come, burnin' trail."

As the youngster slung his carbine and rose in the stirrup, he had a fleeting glimpse of a racing cavalcade, hardly a long rifle shot away. A bullet whined close and the ugly echoes of a shot started wild echoes through the timber.

"North!" hollered Tom Walton, putting his horse into high motion. "Straight into the north." And Vic roared after him, digging his heels savagely.

He didn't try to look back as the timber swallowed them. He couldn't. There was nothing back there now but broken dreams and blasting guns. No, he hadn't the nerve to look back—and it seemed such a futile gesture to look ahead.

Through the waning afternoon they sped, racing before a relentless posse. For a time, their fresh ponies gained. But all such gain was nullified by abortive attempts to blot their trail. Neither of them was practiced in such cunning and the sheriff who led the manhunt seemed to have the tracking instincts of a weasel. After while, Vic vetoed further waste of time by such strategy.

"We've gotta run for it," he declared. "Hit for the high ridges an' loose 'em. It's the only chance we've got."

Dusk found them ranging the high canyon breaks of Indian Peaks, right at timberline. Lead ceased to reach for them then, but bitter wind commenced to seep into their bones and to make the ponies refractory and stubborn. Out of the low-hanging clouds came spitting snow, ever increasing to a solid curtain of white. The skift made the footing treacherous, calling for constant alertness on the part of a rider lest his pony fall.

Full darkness came, adding to the hazard. Another hour of rimming and Vic noticed that old Tom had caved in. He was folded over the horn, his hands hanging loosely on either side of his pony's neck.

With a feeling of impending defeat, Vic got one arm around his sire and

blundered on, pulling up finally when it was apparent that to continue was utter folly. He pulled his father from the saddle and dragged him to the lea of an overhanging rock scarp. He led the ponies aside into a deep thicket of quacking aspen, unsaddled and tied them and returned to his unconscious sire, whom he covered with the saddle blankets.

It was a bleak and trying outlook, waiting there in the swirling storm, without the comfort of fire, not knowing how bad old Tom was hurt or whether the posse was near or had given up the chase. Nothing to do but hug his knees for warmth and wait for tomorrow's light.

Seconds ticked into bitter minutes of suspense. Minutes dragged freezingly into an hour. Then two. The storm wind wailed about the scarp, depositing snow and punishing Vic with its bared teeth. These were the gods he had so boldly challenged, just a few hours ago. This was the thing he had boasted he was ready for—with a stout house and a full wood pile to turn it back!

HIS father stirred, moaned, and Vic's voice was harsh. "So you went to Peacepipe City and killed a man, eh? Who was it?"

"Ivy Payton," mumbled Tom Walton, through chattering teeth. "Boss gambler of the Pastime Saloon, in Peacepipe City. He run in a stripped deck on me an' when I hollered about it, he—"

"You had no money to gamble," broke in Vic bitterly.

"Had a thousand dollars that I hoped to build into—"

"You mean you went to gamblin'—with the money we'd save to buy cattle?"

"Twenty head," sneered the old man. "What a hell of a start for the Flyin' W. I taken a flyer, figgerin' to make it forty head or nothin'. Oh, I know what you'll say—that we should start small, work hard, be patient an' build from the ground up. I've heard it till I'm sick an' tired. I've worked hard all my life, getting nowhere. An' now, first time I make a gamble to put us on our feet, I have to spot a crooked tinhorn the draw, shake out ahead of the sheriff an' finally pass out with a slug in the back. There ain't no luck left."

Cold fingers gripped Vic's heart. "You—you're wounded. Is it bad?"

"Well, it ain't no love tap. Glanced off my ribs, I reckon, but it hurts like hell an' leaves me weak from loss of blood."

"Why are they chasin' you, Dad, if it's like you tell it?"

"Why?" Old Tom cursed luridly. "I'll tell you why. Ivy Payton rates high in Peacepipe, while I'm only a glandered-up ol' cowdog who's better off swung from a tree. Well, it might's well have been thataway as for me to freeze to death out here. What a fool I've been not to have rode the primrose path, high, wide an' handsome, lettin' damn fools like I've been play slave. Too late now. Get wise, son, an' you won't end up on the wrong end of a manhunt, at sixty. . . . Listen!"

Tom Walton's fingers sank into Vic's bicep and together they keened the storm-wracked night. For a moment there seemed nothing but the wild tumult of the wind in the pines. Then, dimly, the muted voices of men materialized, the snorting of horses and the squeal of hoofs in the snow. Father and son lay together in the snow while the posse passed within a rod of them in the intense darkness. Voices came to them.

"Not a bit of use goin' farther, sheriff. It's my guess they've circled the peaks an' struck back to their shack. With this blizzard blowin', they'll die up here without grub an' blankets."

"Don't worry," sang out another. "They'll die down there, same as here. That's what put me behind you fellers back yonder. I lit down an' torched their cabin. There's no nest down there for

them to crawl back into!" they heard.

A brittle curse tore from old Tom Walton's lips and Vic throttled it with his hand. In him, at that moment, was an icy hate of these possemen and the law they stood for. Not content with the chase, they had wantonly burned the Walton cabin, the monument to his dream, his toil and his hope of peace. How did Tom Walton's killing of a crooked tinhorn gambler warrant that uselessly bitter blow?

A DRY laugh escaped the lips of one of the passing possemen. "Was that done to further the cause of law an' order, Ed? Or was you thinkin' of wipin' nesters off yore summer range?"

That laugh rattled up and down the line of horsemen, then they were gone. A searing flame of rage roared through Vic as he thought of the pride he had taken in that tight house and the woodpile stacked against it. It was only char and ash now, nothing to go back to.

"I reckon you're right, Dad," he said between clenched teeth. "It don't seem to buy a man much to work an' struggle, honest. Right now, your primrose path looks pretty good to me. An' God help the man who stands in my way!"

Tom Walton's hand found Vic's, pressed it fervently. "Now yo're talkin', son. It taken me too long a time to get wise; I'm glad you see the light while yo're young enough to really make somethin' of yore life. Step out an' take what you want, when you want it. But don't figger on me. I'm finished. Leave me here an' strike out on yore own. I'm weak an'—an'—awful tired."

"Don't talk like that," remonstrated Vic, banking the snow around his father. "You think I'll ride off an' leave you!" Not a chance! In the morning. . . ."

"Do as I tell you!" commanded the oldster sleepily. "Yo're young an' yore life is all before you. I'm old, an'—finished!"

"No!" Vic snarled his refusal as he rolled and lit a cigaret and placed it between his sire's lips. The old man thanked him drowsily and Vic rolled himself into the snow, for whatever scant protection it afforded against the cutting wind. After a while his eyes closed and he slept soundly.

When he awoke, a bleak dawnlight was filtering through the timber and the wind was still. Vic shook free from his couch of snow, flexing his stiffened and chilled muscles. He let his eyes got to the mound where old Tom was sleeping. Half fearfully, he wondered if it was still sleep, and not something more profound that enveloped his father.

A curse rasped from Vic's lips and he stood up abruptly. For that mound was concave! In it was a single saddle blanket. Tom Walton was gone and—Vic's quick glance confirmed it—so was one of the ponies. For a long moment, the youth stood frozen, weighing the obvious facts. Bullet stricken, maybe dying, old Tom had ridden away into the storm in order that his boy might not be burdened, that he might have a free hand in the new life that stretched ahead.

An aching lump formed in Vic's throat, choking him. He and his dad had never been very close. But now, in his loneliness and misery, it seemed that he was responsible for the reckless, embittered old man, who he had sent him to his death. Panic touched him.

He lifted his voice:

"Dad! Dad! Come back!"

Only echoes answered him. Vic quested for horse tracks, but the snow, still sifting from the gray clouds, had covered everything. Vic saddled, put his chilled pony into motion and cut widening half circles about the spot, shouting and bellowing until the crushing impact of his impotence struck him fully.

He sagged in the saddle sobbing his father's name. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### High-Line Riders

MORE dead than alive, Vic Walton emerged from the mountain country to drift, like a tumbleweed before the lusty blizzard wind. There was no way to tell where he was or where he was heading. Chilled to the bone, weary and disheartened by the certainty that Old Tom Walton had ridden away to die, Vic couldn't command the energy to care much what happened to him. He had nothing to tie to anyway.

Through a bleak, gray daylight he drifted aimlessly, giving his pony its head, closing his senses to misery by drawing a filmy curtain over the windows of consciousness. He was vaguely aware that the dim light had faded into blackness.

Then, how long afterward he could not have told, he was roused by the stopping of his horse, by voices, by strong hands taking hold of him. Nightmares obsessed him then. Men were rolling him into a fire. He screamed and fought. Coals cooked his flesh until the agony became unbearable. Merciful unconsciousness released him from pain.

When Vic awoke, he lay in a bunk between warm blankets and a lean, gaunt-faced youth of his own age was grinning down at him.

"Lucky your pony fetched you to my door, feller. You were about done. I sanded you good with snow, but thought I'd never get the frost rubbed out of you."

"Mebbyso," murmured Vic. "Mebbyso not."

The young rangeman eyed him owlishly, shrugged and started breakfast. He talked ceaselessly, with a pathetic eagerness to provoke conversation. Cows, horses, the cruelties of a blizzard and its benificences, grass and browse and the ups and downs of the stock business. He pointed with pride to a row of books.

"I'm settin' forth to learn the cow business. The man that knows is the man who will make money on a changing range. I save my money and send for government reports on grazing, breeding and marketing. Some day I'll have my own outfit, where I can put my knowledge to work. The boys laugh at me, tell me I'm crazy. But I'll have the laugh on them some time."

"Fools dream," said Vic, thinking of his own rosy ones. "An' dreams blow up. Me, I'm laughin' at you, too!"

When the young line rider probed for the answer to such bitterness, Vic snarled at him. Sullenly he hung about the fire, never lifting his hand. There were bawling cattle milling about some fenced haystacks outside, cattle the line rider had to feed. He suggested Vic lend a hand and was quickly refused. Nor did he so much as help with the cooking.

"Nobody ever done nothin' for me," he said bitterly. "Why should I bust my back for anybody?"

The line rider flared up. "My mistake, neighbor. Maybe I should have left you to the blizzard. Personal, I'd admire to have you here if you was civil an' willing to pitch in an' help. But I've no time for a bum. It's long way to the next meal; maybe you better get started."

SNEERING and restless, Vic rode on across frozen hills and valleys. He rode the grub line, turning down honest work when it was offered, laughing at fool horse and rope men who uncomplainingly froze hands and feet for bosses who grew rich and fat from their efforts. Everywhere he wore out his welcome quickly and rode on. Weeks stretched into months, with bitterness growing in his heart each day. The Chinook came and the snow melted quickly. Vic was far south of the Peacepipe now. The outfits were on the move, making their calf tally. Men were in demand and Vic signed on.

Inside a week, the ramrod fired him for soldiering and preaching disloyalty—a cardinal sin in cattleland.

Vic kept on southward, a numb hopelessness punishing him. Why hadn't he died back yonder in the mountains, with old Tom? Why was he being spared to loneliness, to bitterness and untimate despair? Broke and hungry, he shot a beef, feasted, then skinned out the hind quarters and sold them to a butcher in the little town of Kaytee. He was savoring the money in his pocket, lifting to the drinks he had taken, when a cowboy posse came in looking for him. He made it out of town in a shower of bullets and outran them because he was better mounted. But it was close.

That experience served to dispel the sombre monotony of his thoughts. He felt a new zest in living, a new purpose. The taste had whetted his appetite. Where was the primrose path? Where were the hardy souls who hearkened to the owl hoot, who bowed only to the dictates of their own bold hearts?

The grass turned brown again. Vic's boots were thin-soled; his clothes were in tatters. Winter was just around the corner and he would need a new outfit. That's why he was running down a hint, in a nameless canyon slicing through strange mountains.

Early frost was striking into his bones when he saw the little fire. His horse whinnied, was answered from above. Flitting shadows quit the blaze. A voice said: "Steady, feller! Ride up an' light down."

A thrill shot through Vic as he heard the cocking of pistols, out yonder in the dark. He dismounted, walked to the fire to warm himself. A rawboned, cat-like man appeared, eyeing him with a steady glance that missed nothing. Four others emerged from the brush; lean, hard, dangerous men with their calling deep-stamped upon them.

Vic looked them over, affecting a recklessness he didn't feel now. He spat in the fire, laughed: "You boys ought to sure know me, next time."

"What if there ain't no next time?" murmured the gaunt leader. "Huntin'?"

"Yeah. . . . Huntin'."

"Elk?"

"Slow elk," snapped Vic. "Horses honin' for new riders an' money layin' around loose. Also I'm huntin' pards who are tired of hirin' out for forty a month an' a swift kick in the britches when the snow flies."

They looked at each other, those five. Then they came to hunker silently at the fire. Vic dusted flake tobacco into a paper, passed the makings. All accepted, and tension fell away as smoke coiled above them.

"Yonder's the coffee pot," said the leader, "an' you're welcome to a spot beside the fire."

That was Vic's introduction and acceptance by the wild band of Spider Sage.

FROM its beginnings as a glorious adventure, the week Vic spent in that camp grew to be only boredom and disgust. These five men ate, slept and played poker. They left Vic alone to eat and sleep. He had no money to gamble, while they used ten dollar gold pieces for poker chips. All Vic could do was to tough it out and hope for something better.

One day Spider Sage rode away; next he was back. "Trail petered out to rabbit tracks," he announced, "an' the posses quit. It's all blowed over an' they're layin' it to Cassidy an' his Wild Bunch. Perfectly safe to go down to Clawhammer an' spend our money. When we get 'er spent, we'll go after some more, with Walton gettin' his baptism of high life."

That sounded better. Vic's heart beat excitedly as he rode to Clawhammer with the rest. This was what his father had meant. He would soon have his pockets lined with gold, like these others.

But that gold was in the future, as he soon became aware. His churlish mates didn't offer to buy him a drink, or a meal. Selfishly, they turned to their own pleasures, paying him no heed whatsoever. And Vic was stony broke. After an hour of hanging around disconsolately, Vic went out into the gathering night. It was turning cold and he shivered. Loneliness hurt him as much as the need of clothing.

He saw the Spider leave a saloon, with one of the others. He hurried over and braced him. "I need some duds, Sage. How about letting me borrow a little money until I—"

The outlaw leader, high with whiskey, brushed him aside. "Don't bother me, feller. Can't you see I'm busy? I'll see you later."

They were gone, Vic staring after them with resentful eyes. Nice pards, who wouldn't even loan a man the price of a pair of levi's. Doubt struck him cruelly. Was this the brave existence old Tom Walton had bragged about? Were all the wild ones like this?

Vic pressed back against the building front as the town marshal came along the walk, his star reflecting light from dusty windows. With him, matching his pace with a crippling stride, came a stringy little veteran of the saddle. His voice rose querulously.

". . . . An' here's winter right on top of me, with my roundup not started. Can't git men, Tom, try as I will. Just hit up five strangers in the Grotto Saloon. Good lookin' boys, too. But they only laughed. Times is changin', Tom, an'. . . ."

"You said it, old timer." The fat marshal patted his shoulder and angled across the street, patently glad to be away from the little cowman and his hard-luck story.

Vic, thinking of the cowman bracing Spider and his boys, chuckled audibly. The little cowman whirled on him savagely.

" 'Tain't no laughin' matter, young feller. Boys today is gettin' lazier an' lazier. Won't work. Don't know what the country' comin' to. Sa-a-ay, what outfit you with?"

"I'm a maverick."

"What?" The cowman avidly seized his arm. "Name's Ben Pine. I run a good outfit, pay forty dollars right on the bar'l head an' feed the best on this here range. I'll treat you right, son."

He was almost pathetic in his eagerness and Vic felt a return of his old bitterness. Harsh words trembled on his lips, held back only by a new resentment—that against Spider and his selfish mates. Those gents would let him starve to death or freeze of nights, waiting for the next job to break. Well, he wouldn't starve for anybody.

"I'll go you, if I lose," he said, impulsively. "Where's your outfit?"

"My kid will show you, Mister—?"

"Vic Walton."

"Walton? Related to the Waltons of Owl Crick? No? Now you go to that buckboard with the snuffy duns. I'll take it kindly if you'll tie your pony behind an' do the drivin'. I never let my kid handle the lines with that span uh dynamite. I'll make one more round of the saloons an' see you later."

Feeling a little like a man who has surrendered, Vic got his horse, walked down to the buckboard and tied the beast to the tailgate ring. The boy on the seat turned to regard him. But Vic, angry with himself, flung to the seat, snatched the reins from small, resisting hands.

"Slide over, bub!" he growled. "Your dad allows that drivin' this team is a job for a man. I'm Vic Walton, your new hand."

The slender figure slid over and Vic hit the seat, startled by a feminine voice that was musical for all its note of annoyance.

"Gosh, that's dad all over. When will he learn that I can drive, ride, rope and

shoot better than most men right now? Straight west, cowboy, and keep going till I tell you to turn."

Vic had one quick glance at her as he backed out the rearing duns, reined them and let them lunge into their collars. He saw the trim curve of a lovely, oval face, a generous mouth that was sweet yet reflecting a strength of character and warm, dark eyes, alive and dancing. He had a fleeting suggestion of feminine curves as she swayed lithely to the jerk of the rig.

She was pretty; that was the sum he added from that glance. He had an almost uncontrollable impulse to twist in the seat and feast his eyes upon her. He resisted the urge, feeling suddenly big and awkward, all hands and feet. So he gave the team a free rein, letting them run to hide his confusion

## CHAPTER THREE

### Cross Currents

WITH a roar of wheels, they whirled across the wooden bridge at the end of the main street, the town lights falling behind in a lifting pall of dust. Because it was dark and the road strange to him, Vic began to rein the animals down.

"Let them run!" urged the girl. "I like it and those two broncs sure need a workout. Nothing in the road to worry about."

Vic laughed and let them go, turning his eyes toward her. It was too dark to make out more than the white blot of her face, the long hair released to the violence of the wind. Wild, that's all he made out of that dim figure. Wild as the storm-whipped pines, or the timid creatures that sometimes ventured down from the heights. Her spirit was a concrete force that seemed to lift his mind. And, when she swayed toward him, her shoulder touching his arm, he felt fire run through him. Her hands went to the taut ribbons.

"Let me take them," she begged. "Please."

"No." He forced himself to be gruff. "A girl ain't strong enough. Beside, it ain't seemly. . . ."

"Bosh! You are just like all the rest. I can do anything with horses that you can do. Wait and see, Vic Walton. I'll make you hump to keep up with me, riding circle."

Vic swung on her. "You mean that you're figurin' on makin' a hand, durin' beef-gather?"

"Why not? I've made a hand since I was too young to reach the stirrups. I can ride anything there is, and cut cattle with the best. I've had to do it. Dad couldn't afford many men in those earlier days and now it seems he can't get good men. There was a time when dad could do the work of three men, but a bad bronc put him on the shelf two years ago. His doctor bills put a mortgage on the place and if we don't show a good beef tally, at present prices, we stand to lose the S Bar P. If he can only land a few more men like you, Vic. . . ."

BUT Sarah Pine's hope went for naught. Good men were scarce and already employed. So, two mornings later, Vic sat his pony, watching the old man with the twisted leg start his grizzled cook out with the wagon, then turn to face the nondescript crew of five worn out cowboys and Vic.

"We're short-handed boys," he sang out, "an' I'm dependin' on each of you to do two men's work. It won't be easy an' it won't be for love. Do your sweatin' best by me an' there'll be a fat bonus for every man. Yonder's the remuda; head 'em yonderly."

They yelped a little to show the willingness of the spirit. But their flesh was too weak to develop much in the way of enthusiasm. It must have been disheartening to old Ben Pine, who was too

crippled to hurl himself into the work. It was almost a joke to Vic, also. Why should he kill himself, he kept repeating, when he could take it easy and still make the rest look bad?

But throughout that long first day of riding circle, Vic was challenged to show the best that was in him. For Sarah Pine rode with him, her hard riding and cow savvy showing up every man in the outfit, except Vic. The thought of this slip of a girl out-working him was gall and wormwood, so he dug in.

Despite the efforts of those two, the first day's showing was disappointing. Old Ben Pine was philosophic.

"First day is allus poor," he told them. "But now that we've got the kinks shook out. . . ."

But Sarah didn't seem to share his hopefulness. She seemed studious and worried that night at the campfire. And Vic, watching her covertly, found himself resenting whatever it was that drew down the corners of her pretty mouth, that placed wrinkles across the width of her forehead.

It was bitterly cold next morning. Vic turned back a frosty tarp, drew on icy boots and stomped to the fire to gulp a cup of scalding coffee. Sarah was up before him however, having gone direct from the wagon box where she slept to the rope corral where the jingler held the remuda. She laid her loop on a big roan hammerhead, led him out now to screw a cold saddle on his humped back. Vic tossed his cup into the dishpan and walked over to her. She favored him with a boyish grin.

"This is the kind of weather that warns a feller to save his roundup wages, Vic."

"The kind of weather," he corrected, "that makes a bronc so brittle he busts in two in the middle. Better let me uncock him for you, ma'am."

Her laugh tinkled on the crisp air. "You'll know better in a day or two, cowboy. Don't worry, I can handle him. And yours too, if you don't feel up to it!"

Tight lipped, Vic turned toward the corral. She had stung him and he muttered to himself: "Little she smart-alick. I hope that fuzztail piles her."

He shook out a loop, pausing to watch the girl before cutting himself out a pony. She stirruped her foot, rose slightly as the beast whirled away, bounced lightly on her free foot and was in the saddle. The horse came apart then, bouncing across the flat with the girl raking him at every jump. He tried to swallow his front hoofs, but he must have found unexpected strength in the two small hands that held the reins. He couldn't get his head down and it seemed to infuriate him. He raised on his hind feet, shot high in the air, hit the ground poundingly and went up again. He bucked straight and high for a piece, the old hands shrilling their time-worn: "Stay cowboy-y-y!"

But Old Ben Pine, his face contorted with the morning miseries and a dogging fear, was cursing Sarah for her recklessness in taking the worst horse in the cavvie, his plaint lifting to a tone of desperation as the beast swapped ends, lit reverse and came back in high motion, bawling as he pounded the frosty ground.

Sarah was scratching him on both sides, fanning his head. Her slender body was whipped as the horse bucked in a circle, crooked as a snake and blindly determined to shake that human burr on his back. But the girl was gripped there now and the fighting cast of her face showed she meant to stay. And, though he was afraid for her, Vic found himself cheering.

Driven by Old Ben, two of the hands were running for horses to take her off the back of that roan devil. But long before they were saddled, the brute quit as suddenly as he had begun. He came catfooting back to the camp, docile enough. The girl swung down, reeled a little and wiped a trickle of blood from her nostrils.

Her eyes were dazed, yet she could still flash a scornful glance at Vic.

"What's the matter, cowboy. Scairt you can't match me?"

It rankled. Moving in to rope a mount, Vic made a resolve. He'd show her he was no cull, no matter what she thought. His pony didn't put up much of a fight. A few minutes later Vic was eating with the rest, silent, sullen, not daring to trust a look at Sarah. Breakfast over, a sharp command rifled through the camp.

"Shake out your legs, you cow-nurses! Get into your leather; there's work to be done!"

Vic started. Not at the harshness of the order, but in the belated knowledge that he had spoken the words, taken command. Flushing, he turned toward his horse.

Old Ben's hand cracked between his shoulders. "That's the fight, kid. Hold 'em to it; I'm dependin' on you."

It warmed him, that praise. He was feeling a little ashamed of that when Sarah reined over to him, her eyes sparkling.

"You're a pard," she said, with a fervor that frightened him.

"Aw, shut up," he answered, ungallantly. "I'm nobody's pard. I'm a cowpuncher doin' my job. An', seein' you've made your brags about makin' a hand, suppose you do the same."

And as he rode out in the lead, he was puzzled by the merry lilt of her laughter, when by all right she should have been annoyed. Girls were an unguessable lot.

HE HAD reason to second that thought less than an hour later. He was riding a brushy ridge, Sarah paralleling him a few rods to his left. A big red steer broke from its covert just ahead, avalanching over the rim and down the slant. Vic's yipping brought the girl's head up. She stabbed her mount with the spurs, lashed after the steer with swinging loop widening. She threw her pony recklessly over the rim, rode him through space to a heavy landing. The horse faltered as he lit. His knees buckled and he pitchpoled, throwing Sarah down the slant in a rolling fall.

Vic cried out in horror as he followed. Then a wave of admiration swept him as she came up, limping after her pony. She caught him, hit leather and raced to cut the wild steer back toward the holding ground. There was a lump in Vic's throat as he continued on down the ridge. Some cowboy, that girl—one to stir out the very best in a man!

The rest of that day Vic did his own work and drove the others to furious effort. That night, weary, battered but flushed with their success, he was unsaddling at camp when one of the men came to him.

"What's the idea of all the push, feller?" he asked. "This ain't yore roundup, or is it?"

Vic just glanced at him and walked away. But the query had stirred into life the coals of his old bitterness. They were not his cows. The roundup meant nothing to him but the money he would make out of it. Why should he hurry to make Ben Pine rich?

Gathering clouds broke into rain as they were eating supper. Slickers were donned and the fire built up. Troubled in his mind, Vic withdrew from the camp to watch the lightning play around the peaks and to listen to the sullen muttering of thunder, when old Ben found him.

"Want to thank you son, for takin' hold like you done. If today's luck holds. . . ."

"It won't," broke in Vic, "unless you double the guard tonight. If that lightnin' moves this way, them critters will spook in spite of hell."

The cowman grunted, stepped to the fire to give the order. Sullen comment rose from the weary men and they wasted little love on Vic after that. Vic stood first guard in a chilling rain that turned to

sleet. The cutting wind ate through to the bone, numbing him. But, because the older hands were not up to it, he refused to be relieved when the guard was changed. Sarah came to him at midnight, her teeth chattering with the cold.

"There's hot coffee at the fire and a dry bed under the wagon, Vic," she told him. "You've been doing two men's work; you must have rest. I'll stand this trick."

"Go back to bed, Sarah," he said tenderly. "This is no weather for a woman to be out."

"Woman!" She snorted. "You won't let me forget that, will you?"

"I know you can do a man's work," he admitted. "It aint that. But—but a man hates to see lines on a woman's face, lines put there by a chore like this. I want to remember you as I saw you that first night, fresh, sweet and—"

"Vic!" Her voice trembled as she put her pony closer. For a moment, Vic felt himself weaken. A light flared in his brain, like a bolt from above shows a sudden detail of benighted reality. Then, just as lightning comes and is gone, that inner flash was gone and his mind was back in the old bitter groove.

"Get back to the camp," he gruffed, "before I warm you with my rope. Get!"

He whirled his pony to circle back. And the sound that came from behind him was puzzling. It might have been a laugh. Then again, it might have been a sob.

Chill dawn brought clearing skies and the sun. When Vic, dog-tired and numb of body, rode in for breakfast, he found old Ben Pine beaming happily.

"Things work out," he enthused. "Luck is with us. We'll have a spell of good weather after this rain an' I've just signed two good hands that rode right to the camp. Sure looks rosy!"

Vic followed his glance, and then the food stuck in his throat. The two new hands were sitting apart from the rest, with plates of food and cups of coffee. They were by no means strangers to him.

Ben Pine had signed Lon Reno and Link Temple—two of the toughest of Spider Sage's outlaw followers. They were looking at Vic with quizzical stares, unasked questions in their slitted eyes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Devil's Saddlemates

AS USUAL, Sarah rode with Vic that morning. When they were alone, she came to him, her eyes troubled. "What do you think of the new hands?" she demanded.

Vic shrugged sullenly. "Why should I think anything about them?" he asked. "I've got plenty to think about without making more."

"Sure," she said, "but. . . ."

A steer broke brush ahead of them and the girl took after it, heading it down toward lower levels. It was then the two new cowhands came quartering in on Vic.

"Well," grinned Lon Reno. "Imagine findin' you here. The boss wondered where you'd gone."

"Don't tell me he worried about it," sneered Vic. "Not after him refusin' me the price of new levi's."

"Spider did that?" Link Temple lifted his brows. "Why didn't you come to me, feller?"

"Because I'd have got the same answer," snapped Vic. "Not one of you so much as offered me a drink, knowing I was busted."

"No, wait a minute," protested Reno. "Ain't a one of us boys but would have give you our last shirt. We just never thought of it, that's all. Here. . . ." He fished out some gold coins. "Take this to tide you over."

"No, thanks. I won't be needin' it now." They were patently contrite and he had a hard time maintaining his resentment. "Howcome you're signin' onto this two-

bit beef gather, with gold money in your pockets?"

"A plumb personal question," said Temple. "You still with us, feller?"

"Any reason why I should be?"

They exchanged glances, those two. Then Reno said: "Reckon I know how you feel, Walton. But you've got us all wrong. Here's the lay of it. This herd is our next haul. We've looked it over careful an' it's duck soup. When the herd's built, we'll take it over, drive it across the hills an' turn it over to a buyer Spider's got lined up. What we make out of it will fix us nice for the winter, somewhere in Texas. How does it look to you?"

"Easy," admitted Vic, tonelessly. "Way we're going, we'll finish up in three days' time. What's the plan?"

"When the gather's done, we hop the guard at midnight—sharp. We plug the old fossils ridin' herd, an' the rest, if they ask for it. Then we'll take the gal an', with the boys Spider will fetch to help, we'll drive till the next night an' be a hundred mile south before anybody's the wiser."

Vic suppressed a shudder. "Why bother with the girl?"

"That's for Spider," grinned Reno. "He's a Don Juan that takes his wimmen where he finds 'em."

"And the old man?"

"Beef him. He's glandered up an' on his last laigs anyhow. Any suggestions?"

"None," said Vic stiffly. "Except you better not give the play away by soldierin' on the job. Light in an' get out some cattle. The girl's halfway suspicious. . . ."

"Sa-a-ay!" Link Temple's eyes narrowed. "You sure you won't turn soft on us, thinkin' about that filly?"

"If you think I'm soft," growled Vic, "just try me out. When the time's ripe, we'll let loose some hell around here."

The ugliness of his tone seemed to satisfy them and they followed him.

TWO fresh, hard-riding hands added materially to the gather, during the next few days. Yet, because of a growing tally from the brushy range, the time dragged out longer than expected by two days. When the last of the range had been combed, when night settled down upon the completed herd, the crew gathered about the chuck wagon for their last supper in camp.

They were a drawn, weary lot, reacting none at all to Old Ben Pine's enthusiasm.

"You boys have sure done fine," he beamed. "I didn't look for much more'n half the tally we're holdin' out yonder. Got word, too, that the price is liftin'. Thanks to you all, I'll save the S Bar P an' have money in the bank. An', believe me, I'll not forget you boys can't live on thanks. Tomorrow early, we'll head 'em for the loadin' pens, in Clawhammer."

Silence greeted him, a silence faintly broken by Lon Reno's snort. Vic saw the two outlaws swap covert glances and felt his blood run colder. The spent old timers made a bee line for their soogans and were instantly asleep. Talk languished at the fire, Old Ben yawned a time or two and then allowed:

"I reckon I'll roll in so as to be tail-high an' rearin' come daylight. Vic, I'll leave the guard changin' to you."

He went to his bed under the wagon, Vic grunting acceptance of the responsibility. Why did old Ben pour it onto him? He'd never made him foreman, never mentioned a raise in pay. The girl, sitting across from Vic, kept her eyes on him. He didn't meet her glance, preferring to stare into the flames, but he could feel the impact of her interest and he seeemed to sense a troubled questioning there, which he dared not face.

After while Sarah rose, said: "I'm going to bed; see you in the morning." Vic nodded, without lifting his eyes. He heard the wagon creak as she entered it. Then

he and the outlaws were alone at the fire. A chill wind swirled through the camp, fanning the coals to white heat. And those two were sliding closer to Vic, one on either side.

"Tonight at midnight!" Reno's whisper sent a tremor through Vic. "Link an' me, we'll ride out now to make extra guard. That'll give me a chance to build the signal fire on the hill. We'll take care of the boys ridin' herd. You take care of these cowhands an' the old man. It'll be easy, what with them comin' out of their beds, drugged with sleep. One gun full an' it's done. Then rope the girl an' come out to the herd. You got it straight?"

"No loopholes in that," said Vic grimly.

"Don't give 'em no chance," warned Link Temple. "We can't afford to have somebody get away to rouse the sheriff. Make it a wipe-out."

"A wipe-out," repeated Vic, and strangely he was thinking of Spider's hard hand as he pushed aside a shivering man who asked for a loan of the price of warm clothes.

The outlaws rose. Loudly, Reno said: "Reckon mebby me an' Link better go out an' circle herd, feller. Too bad if we'd lose 'em just as we're ready to drive."

Vic said nothing, continuing to stare at the fire as they saddled and rode away. When the sounds of their passing had ceased, the wagon creaked again and Sarah was beside him.

"Vic!" There was a note of alarm in her voice. "What is it? What did they want you to do?"

It startled him. "Nothing. Go to bed."

"Do men whisper among themselves for nothing? Tell me."

"I'll tell you!" Vic turned angry eyes to her. "I'll tell you plenty if you don't go way and let me alone."

He was sorry then that he had spoken like that. The hurt of his words showed in her eyes and she seemed so small, defenseless, so poorly armored against the terror to come. Saying no more, she sought the wagon and Vic sat there, smoking cigarette after cigarette, his mind a battle ground where two Vic Waltons waged a bitter struggle for his soul.

The fire burned down and he failed to replenish it. The cold wind numbed his back as he watched the Great Dipper wheel about the Polar Star. Two hours had gone since he had glimpsed the distant flicker of the signal fire. Stirring himself, Vic drew his gun, carefully placed a shell under the hammer. Then, on hands and knees, he moved to the wagon, shivering less from the cold than from a sense of critical eyes watching him from the wagon box.

Between the wheels, he lay flat alongside old Ben's bed, placing his hand violently over the old man's mouth. Pine struggled, his hands locking Vic's wrist.

Into his ear, Vic rasped: "Quiet! Listen to me. I'm going out yonder. Raise your men an' get 'em ahorse. Quietly, you understand? An' tell 'em to have their holsters greased for quick drawin'. Keep Sarah in the wagon."

Ben Pine sat up, his face a pallid blot in the blackness. "Why? What's up, son? What's wrong?"

"Nothing yet. Do as I tell you, an' there may not be. If there's any shootin' an' the herd runs, have the boys whoop 'em down the valley, toward Clawhammer. Your beef check depends on it—an' mebby your life! So long."

He was gone then, forking his horse, already saddled for emergencies, and taking an unhurried pace toward the dark blot of the sleeping herd.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Where Gun-Trails Cross

A SOARING moon, obscured by scudding clouds, left the earth prey to blackness. A chill, rustly wind disturbed

the bedded cattle, which whooshed and snorted their annoyance. An aged cowhand, circling the critters, lifted his cracked voice in song.

> The cowboy's life is a dreary one,
> He works from dawn till the setting of sun. . .

Lost in the shadows at the toe of the hill, Vic Walton watched the herd with eyes that smouldered. He counted the guards. They were one short. He saw the squat form of Lon Reno coming around the flank, knew that Link Temple was somewhere else. But where? The answer eluding him, Vic rode from his covert, heading toward Reno. He had covered half the distance when there were hoofbeats behind him. He whirled. Temple came quartering in from the brush line, his voice heavy with suspicion.

"Wait a minute, Walton. I've been watching you. What are you up to? Why ain't you on the job, back yonder at the camp?"

He curbed sharply before Vic, his body tense and ready. Vic seemed just a little indolent as he faced him; his voice was unutterably weary.

"Why? Because I'm not going through with it, that's why."

"Just what I thought," muttered Temple, softly. "I've had my suspicions about you all along." Then, lifting his voice: "You dirty, double-crossin' snake!"

His hand flashed, but Vic was alive, alert and ready, in a way quite belied by his pose. The moon came out from behind a cloud as Vic shot first. Link Temple reared in his stirrups, struggled vainly to bring his gun level, and screamed, "Lon! Look out. . . !" Then he was dead, toppling from his alarmed horse.

At the herd, Lon Reno gave an answering cry as he roared toward Vic, without any give to his sturdy body, without caution, with no indirection. His gun came streaking out and his face was so contorted as to suggest that he could not endure the sight of this traitor to his cause still alive, still a menace.

The herd, stunned from sleep by the shot, came up as a mass to stand trembling, straining their senses. Vic, being on the up-valley side of them, fired again and again, not at Reno, but into the air. Bovine fear became panic as, with thunder of hoof and clash of horn, the herd broke toward Clawhammer at a swift run-bawl. Vic's yell, answering that of the riders who debouched from the camp, was drowned in a chaos of sound. And not until then did Vic give the last full measure of his attention to the death roaring down upon him, halting his pony to wait.

Five rods; four rods; three. Vic saw the man raise his gun, gave all his concentration to leveling his own at his hip. Two shots split the night. Death whined past Vic. Reno's horse, struck fatally, reared back, tossing its rider.

The man's coördination was apparent then. He rolled, came up in full stride, firing as he ran. His face was a killer mask, and Vic's bullet struck that face squarely, wiping away its ugliness, leaving blankness and the dullness of earth. Reno fell.

Vic cuffed at where a slug had nicked his left arm. A shrill call came rifling through the receding thunder of the running herd.

"Vic! Vic, oh my dear."

Vic flung Sarah one swift look, then turned his eyes to the cavalcade galloping down through the moonfog. "Get back, girl!" he roared at her. "There's trouble here."

"And you remain to face it alone, eh? Oh no you don't. It's my right more than yours."

"Go back, you silly little fool!" he thundered, and more with the idea of leaving her out of it than from pure reck-

lessness, he spurred to meet the five riders.

He recognized that gaunt, straight figure a length in the lead as Spider Sage. And he heard the man's bawled: "By God, boys, it's that Walton jigger. He's horned in again an' spoiled our play. Yeah, an' yonder's his tally on the ground. Lon an' Link!"

The renegade was shooting then, and his mates were not slow in following suit. Hugging the withers like an Indian, blazing away across his saddle, Vic circled. And he was amazed at what he saw happen. He felt sure he nailed the leader with the first shot. He would not have been surprised if he had winged another. But suddenly there were three riderless horses milling there and two of the outlaws were fogging it desperately for distant places. Not until his own pony moaned and fell was Vic conscious of the heavy tones of the rifle, spacing its shots.

When he came up, Vic saw Sarah out there on the flat, dismounted and on one knee as she hurled the last bullet from her saddle carbine toward that fleeing pair. Then she was on her feet, looking just a little pitiful as she awaited his rage. But there was no rage in Vic. That light was flaring brightly in his brain now, fanned to white heat by a passion such as he had never experienced. She looked at his face as he planted himself before her.

"I guess it wasn't seemly of me, Vic. . ."

"Most awful unwomanly," he said drily, "but most amazingly satisfying to a man you're side-partnering." He looked down into her eyes. "I'm seriously tempted to. . . ."

"How can I hope to tempt you, Vic, when you're strong enough to resist the temptation of big money against forty a month? I'm very proud of you, Vic."

He gave in to his temptation then and kissed her. She clung to him, and neither was aware of Ben and his riders until the horses were almost on top of them.

THE drive was over. The S Bar P herd was on board cars, east-bound. The old hands were paid off, wages and bonus, and turned adrift. But old Ben Pine had said nothing about pay or bonus or job, nothing more than to order him out to the ranch for a final settlement.

Riding out from town, nobody had a chance to utter a word. Old Ben never quit talking, enthusing over payment of his loan, of banking money to buy thoroughbred whitefaces, and of the rosy prospects for the future.

Vic hardly heard him. His thoughts were with Sarah, and himself. Boldly, he told himself he wanted her more than anything in the world. But how could he tell her that? Old Ben owed him maybe thirty dollars—about enough to outfit himself for the winter. A common cowpoke, he'd never have enough to think seriously about a girl like Sarah.

Bitterness touched him, brought back old Tom Walton's arguments. He was tasting the gall that had flavored his father's hopes, all his life, gall that had turned him away from honesty and toward the primrose path. The only chance a man had to get ahead was to rob. Yet, when he had been given the chance. . . .

It was snowing a little when they reached the ranch. Sarah, happy to be home, sang at her stove as she got dinner. Yet she was strangely silent and a little shadowy of eye as she bade them sit down to meal. Old Ben Pine tipped his head, mumbled grace, then lifted his eyes to Vic.

"Now, young feller, I've got you where I want you. What you mean by kissin' my gal?"

"Dad!" said Sarah, rising in confusion.

"Set down, Sarah. Speak up, Walton. You proved out to be about the best hand I ever had on the S Bar P. You done two men's work, mebbyso more. You taken hold without bein' told. You uncovered a scheme to ruin me, turned down big money to be party to it an' risked

your life to handle it alone. You done some elegant shootin' out there an', by the grace uh God, come through without gettin' plugged. But, let me tell you, that don't give you no right to go huggin' my daughter ag'in' her will."

"He didn't," snapped Sarah, then colored. "Not against my will."

"Didn't, eh?" He squinted comically at them. Then they were all laughing. The room still echoed to their mirth when there was a knock at the door. Old Ben went.

Vic and Sarah heard a quavering voice say: "It's snowin', Mister, an' I'm hungry an' plumb tuckered. Mightn't you have a meal for an old man an' somethin' honest he could putter around at to earn it?"

"By godfrey," they heard old Ben exclaim. "You are a sight to be ramblin' around in the snow, old feller. Worse glandered up than I am, an' I've got sympathy for such. Step in an' meet my ramrod, Vic Walton. Mebby he can fix up a job for you, where you can putter."

"Vic—Vic Walton?" Something in that halting query caught at Vic's throat. Then Ben was ushering in a limping oldster who doffed a tattered hat with a hand that lacked three fingers, who stared rheumy-eyed at the tall youngster.

Vic met that stare, his heart pounding with the wonder of it, his throat aching with an emotion that sprang from his soul. Though it seemed impossible, here was Tom Walton, his sire, who had tired of the heartbreak of honesty, quit it in a blizzard for the profits of the primrose trail.

"Vic, my boy."

"Dad!"

They came together, their arms going about one another. For a moment they clung there, their breath coming in sobs, father and daughter watching silently. At last Tom Walton stepped back to regard his boy. He smiled tragically.

"Glad to find you here, doin' honest work, son. Mighty glad. You were right, I was wrong. Feller don't have to look at you, ramroddin' a cow outfit, and trusted by your boss, to know that. Just look at me, an' you've got your proof. But I'm cured, son. All I ask is a few crumbs from the table an' some honest work."

It was at once a confession, a penitence and a pledge. Through eyes swimming with tears that were not all of pity, Vic looked at old Ben. He looked at Sarah.

"I'll make a place at the table, Vic," she said, her voice husky. "Let's sit down; the food's getting cold. And pray God it may be one of many meals together."

Something in the way she said that; something in the way old Ben Pine said, "amen" was promise enough to Vic that through the maze of man-tracks marking the primrose trail, two paths had parted, wound deviously and come together again —leading at last into a byway of peace.

THE END

# ALL STRANGERS MUST DIE!

By TOM ROAN

The man on the sorrel pulled rein. "You're job, is it?" he asked. . . .

**Pocotello Dave Deeth laughed off the grim prophecy that he'd never ride out alive from the twisted corner of hell men called the Devil's Cradle. . . . But that was before he found himself between the bushwhack guns of the Blowing Horners and the murderous Singing Wind warriors—with the killer he'd sworn to bring back alive lining gunsights on his back!**

FOR more than eighty miles of rough trail there had been silence. It had been vast and brooding, a muffled spell that seemed cast over the towering hills, to mute even the crying of birds in the trees along the icy streams. Not until the sudden crash of a shot and a fierce, last wail of a dying man came rocketing down the cliffs to the old ledge trail then did Pocotello Dave Deeth know there was a human being within many miles.

He was high in the Devil's Cradle, the wildest and most hopelessly broken country of all the Montana Rockies. Mile upon mile of sheer ruggedness climbed heavenward at every hand in the thin, clear air where the walls of black mountains and wind-eroded crags lifted their snow-capped peaks above deep, dark canyons. It was a land of the eagle, the goat and the mountain sheep; dangerous country where wanted men could hide and an army could not bring them down to civilization.

Dave Deeth knew enough about it. A lean, wiry man of thirty, clad in serviceable black and mounted on a tall gray with an old Death Head brand on the right hip, he had caught his first glimpse of the Devil's Cradle three mornings ago at dawn.

From a V-shaped pass in the great Saw Tooth Range, he had stared at it with amazement, looking upon a far-flung monstrosity of nature's moulding and shaping of frowning hills and shining peaks. Even from the distance the Devil's Cradle had breathed an air of grim silence and breathless mystery.

The sound of that shot and that one prolonged wail coming from somewhere along the top of the black cliffs brought Graveyard, his horse, to a quick halt. Deeth's right hand flinched to the black butt of one of the long six-shooters hanging on their broad belts at his hips. Warning words now came back to him—words that had been uttered by an old sheepherder on a great plateau far west of Saw Tooth Range.

"Don't trust yore own eyes an' ears when yuh hit the Cradle, cowboy. The ghosts walk back there in them high hills an' deep canyons. It's Gawd-awful purty in its way, but danged few men go in there what ever find their way out agin. Even the Indians will tell yuh that it's a place to keep out of, unless yuh wanta give the buzzards a feedin'."

TALK like that had only made Deeth all the more determined. He had not given much credit to it. Many sheepherders were merely garrulous old men who took sheer delight in the sounds of their own voices when strangers dropped by their lonely camps in the hills.

Besides all that, he had a mission back here. Somewhere in the Cradle he believed he would find a man. It would probably not be nice when he did cross trails with one Rube Amber, but he was back here to try to cross that trail. And now that the shot had sounded and that cry had come down to him, Deeth moved on, tense in his saddle.

He slipped his old carbine out of its scabbard, and laid it across the crook of his left arm. Six-shooters were all right for fast work in a close fight, but the old saddle-gun spelled all the difference in the world in a battle where long-range lead was needed. And something told him that he was going to have a mighty good use for the old Winchester before the lowering sun dropped beyond the dark ranges of mountains to westward.

Abruptly now, the ledge was broadening. Deeth rounded a gradual bend in the face of the cliffs, and came to a break in the overhanging rocks. Here, like a broad, ragged gash, was a break that led almost straight to the top of the cliffs. It was steep and covered in places with dangerous shale, but there was fairly good footing for the nimble Graveyard, and Deeth turned upward, giving the horse free rein for the sharp climb. A three-minute scramble brought him to the rim of a flat plain with a jumbled, cone-shaped mountain rising from the center, a mile away.

He did not see the big bay horse to his left until the animal nickered to Graveyard. It was bridled and saddled, standing with his reins dropped on the ground in a thicket of low jackpines. A man tense with caution, Deeth turned and rode

toward the horse. As he drew closer he caught a glimpse of a thin hair-line of smoke rising from a little clearing inside the thicket.

Not until he entered the edge of the trees did Deeth see the dead man. He was lying on the ground beyond a smouldering little fire made of raked-up pine needles and small dead limbs. A branding iron was still thrust in the fire, and beyond the dead man lay a fat steer, an animal roped and tied down, all ready for the hot iron that death had cut short befor the work could be done.

IT WAS the body of a man of forty, a thick-set fellow in the brown garb of a cowpuncher. Matted beard covered his face. He was grimy and almost black, lying there face-downward with his right hand clutched like a filthy claw in the pine needles while the other hand and arm extended straight out from his left shoulder.

One glance at his back was enough to tell the story. The man had been shot from behind, and evidently without a hint of warning. His heavy six-shooters were still in their well-worn brown holsters, and there was a rifle hanging to the saddle horn of the bay.

The job had all the earmarks of plain murder, even if the black-bearded man had been trying to rustle somebody's big steer. Deeth dismounted, the carbine still in the crook of his arm. The tingling sensation that stole over him told him he was being closely watched. He glanced on beyond the rim of the thicket, and saw that the plain in that direction was broken with a net-work of deep, dry ravines that gutted their way down through the grass and earth to a sudden drop-off on the rim of the cliffs.

Men, and even horses, could be hiding in those ravines, but a man would only court an early date with the buzzards if he started toward them. Deeth knew that. Men who shot others in the back did not want to be met face-to-face just after the bloody job was done.

Deeth turned back to Graveyard. He half-expected the crash of a shot and a sudden stab of pain from a bullet between his own shoulder blades. He even wondered what was holding back the shot when he picked up Graveyard's long reins and started to mount the horse.

A fierce rattle of hoofs halted him before he could leave the spot. Glancing northeastward, he saw two tall riders galloping toward the pine thicket.

One of the men rode a flea-bitten roan. The other was mounted on a high-headed, blaze-faced sorrel. Like the dead man, they were dressed in cowpuncher garb and wearing heavy, stubbled beards. Each carried a pair of six-shooters at his hips, and the butt of a carbine bobbed from a scabbard under each man's left leg.

As the riders grew closer their faces took on the sharp features of a pair of birds of prey. They were almost exactly alike, both in looks and in dress. Something told Deeth that they were brothers —with even a possibility of them actually being twins. Each was somewhere close to fifty. Each had cold, washed-out blue eyes, a sharp-hooked nose, and a thin, hard-chiseled face that might have been chopped out of granite. As they neared the pines, the man on the roan slacked his pace to drop behind while the man on the sorrel came galloping on.

It was an old fighting trick of two men who knew how to work together. Deeth did not like the looks of it. The man on the roan pulled to a halt, swung his horse slightly to the left, and twisted himself to one side in his saddle—a sharp-faced, hawk-eyed man all set and ready to fly into gun-action and back any sudden play the man on the sorrel might make.

"HOWDY, stranger!" The man on the sorrel pulled rein four yards from Deeth, and glanced with a quick

frown at the dead man, the big steer, and the smouldering fire. "What's goin' on? We heard the shot from up on the Blowin' Horn." He jerked his head toward the cone-shaped rise. "Yore job, is it?"

"You know as much about it as I do," explained Deeth, briefly beginning to tell all he knew of the murder.

"Just a plum stranger in these parts, huh?" The man on the sorrel looked at him with a smile that was akin to a leer. "Odd, I'd say. Not many just plain strangers come. 'Tain't what I'd call exactly healthy. Prospectin' a little didja say?"

"A little—perhaps," nodded Deeth.

"An' no pack outfit," grinned the man on the sorrel. "That's oddish, too. I reckon yo'll have to ride with me an' see my boss." The cold, pale eyes were watching Deeth's face closely.

For some reason the man did not seem even remotely interested in the dead man and the tied-down steer.

"That ain't one of his cows. Ain't one of his riders. The dead duck's a Blowin' Horner. I'm a Singin' Wind man. I ride," the pale eyes narrowed, "for Jasper Dunkard, if that means anything to yuh, mister."

"It doesn't mean a thing." There was something in the older man's voice that was beginning to anger Deeth. It was such a cold, unfriendly voice, and those pale eyes were like poison, filled at one moment with mockery, and at the next appearing to give off a cold, dangerous sheen. "I think we'd better do something about that steer and the dead man—"

"Only, mister," again those cold eyes were narrow, "a Singin' Wind man don't mess his hands with a Blowin' Horner. We don't mess our hands with a Skyland man, either. Does Skyland mean anything to yuh? Like, maybe, yuh might be comin' in to ride for—Oh, Gawd!"

The crash of a shot had suddenly straightened the man in his saddle. He was like a ghost, his mouth suddenly wide-open, eyes staring, his hands lifting—a rigid, death-stricken thing, who was spilling out of his saddle to go plunging head-first to the ground.

THE man on the roan never had a chance despite his alertness. He let out one yell. His hands pawed for the six-shooters at his hips. The weapon at his right hip leaped almost clear of its holster. It was jabbed back with spasmodic jerk of the hand, and the man stiffened in his saddle.

For an instant his face stared ghastly white. The white vanished as quickly as it came, and a curtain of blood ruffled down the man's face from a bullet hole driven in the center of his forehead.

Then a third shot came. The roan lunged to one side. The man careened out of his saddle, and plunged to the ground like a limp rag suddenly dropping into an ungainly bundle.

Deeth had left Graveyard with a leap, the carbine now ready in his hands. Seeking cover, he darted back to the boles of three trees standing close together. In a moment he would have been going into action, but a racking, bark-like splatter of laughter halted him. An instant later a voice spoke.

"Take 'er easy, pilgrim. I don't aim to kill yuh—leastwise not jist yit! Put down yore gun. I coulda killed yuh with the rest as easy as knockin' a fly off my nose."

A man appeared, a ghost rising out of dead limbs and high weeds on the rim of a ravine twenty yards beyond the tied-down steer. He at least looked like something that had been a man. There was a rifle in his hands. He was long and lean, a ragged specter in run-over boots, a battered black lump on the back of his head that might have been called a hat, and a pair of glistening cartridge belts around his middle.

The man's face held Deeth's amazed

stare. It was lipless and noseless. A dozen knife scars clouded it. The scars were huge wrinkles of flesh, and the man's yellow fang-like buck teeth protruded forward. He spoke again. Deeth had never heard such a voice. It was like the snarling of a dog.

"I'm neither a Blowin' Horn man ner a Singin' Wind hoss thief an' cow rustler. I'm Jude Amber, brother of Rube Amber. We gun-farm the Skyland bunch."

It was shocking when Deeth realized that he was staring at a young man barely twenty years old. In addition to the terrible ugliness of that awful face, the youth was also a cripple. There was no bend to his knees. From the hips downward the feet and legs were like stilts with the right hip jerking the right leg forward with jumpy hunches.

"Don't stare at me, mister!" he snarled. "I don't like hit! I ain't beautiful! I know hit. Nature didn't carve me together like this. It took some time for Jasper Dunkard an' his Chink, White Cloud, to do this to me."

He took no apparent notice of the dead men. His greenish-gray eyes stared straight at Deeth's face, leering. He came on to the dead man's sorrel. Holding the rifle with his right hand, he reached forward with a claw-like left, and scooped the horse's reins into the crook of his arm.

"Two Singin' Wind men killed my hoss three hours ago." He seemed to be trying to grin now. "They mostabout kill a hoss from under me ever' day. I allus manage to kill somebody an' take me another'n. Where're yuh goin', mister, an' what are yuh lookin' after in the Cradle? I heard yuh tell Ike Lunn," he glanced down at the tall figure of the dead man at his feet, "that yuh was maybe doin' a mite of prospectin', which is a lie."

He caught himself, his ears appearing to prick up like a listening dog's, his head cocking to one side. Deeth had heard no sound other than the horror-faced wretch's voice, but something had caught the youth's attention. He moved his head with a jerk, and glanced quickly across the plain toward the cone-shaped rise.

"Rube Amber an' my cousin Mary acomin'." A croak-like chuckle came out of the lipless mouth. "Rube'll cuss a little. 'T'won't hurt. Keep yore bill outa hit if yuh wanta live. We Skyland kinfolks stick together, come what'll come or won't."

DEETH saw the man and the girl coming now. He had come here to meet Rube Amber, but if that was Rube Amber coming toward him on a tall claybank, then the banker in northern Idaho who had set him on the man's trail had never seen Rube Amber.

The man who had robbed a bank and shot a cashier dead in his tracks in Lava Rock three weeks ago had been tall and dark, a handsome gunman of no more than thirty-five at the most; and the man galloping toward the thicket was short and stout, a well-armed, yellow haired and yellow-mustached individual of fifty with a tall, golden-haired girl in brown mounted on a hot-headed pinto beside him.

In reckless fashion, the man and the girl galloped up and threw themselves out of their saddles. For almost ten seconds after that not a word was spoken. The man simply stood and looked at the dead men, at the steer on the ground, and then at Deeth.

Deeth caught himself staring at the girl. In this hopeless confusion of blood and damnation up here on the high rim, she looked like something sorely out of place. There were business-like six-shooters hanging at her hips, and a rifle on her pinto's saddle, but she did not have the look of a girl who could even speak to such a merciless killer as the maimed youth who had called himself Jude Am-

ber. She was a delight to any man's eye, a blue-eyed, sweet-faced girl, the kind to make a man remove his hat with a glance.

"So what?" demanded Rube Amber, glancing at the awful Jude.

"Just what yuh see," nodded the youth. "I caught this 'un ready to run a brand. He won't be caught tryin' to run another. Then, as I'm waitin', this 'un comes along." He nodded toward Deeth. "I'd seen 'im hours ago comin' up Lone Wolf Canyon 'fore he got to the foot of the Blowin' Horn Base. He comes, an' then *they* come. I'm still waitin'. It was like shootin' pigs in a pen."

"An' more hell to pay because of it, Jude!" snapped the man. "I've tried—"

"Don't bleat, Rube, don't bleat!" cut in the youth. "I see quite a batch of company headin' this way. Hit yore saddle, an' we'll cut the steer loose. Maybe better take that duck with us." He nodded to Deeth. "'Less yuh figure I might as well shoot 'im now as later."

"A nice crowd to be in, isn't it?" The girl spoke, looking at Deeth. "I'm sorry that we go at things so abruptly in the Cradle, stranger, but chances just aren't taken up here."

She did not have to tell Deeth that. For a moment anger flushed his lean face. He felt like telling them all to go to hell on the spot, but the "company" Jude Amber had mentioned changed his mind.

He could see them high up there on the slopes of Blowing Horn, an even dozen riders halted in a group while their leader was looking down on the flat through a shining brass telescope. In a minute the riders were coming on, having suddenly plunged their horses into a reckless gallop.

"Scabbard your saddle-gun and mount, if you're going with us, stranger!" The girl spoke to Deeth again, and this time there was a note of command in her tone. "The Blowing Horn crowd will kill you if they find you here. You can tell us who you are and why you are here as we ride. We'll want to know all about you, and no lying." The pretty blue eyes narrowed. "If you ring true and want it, there's a place for you on Skyland."

"An' if yuh don't ring true, mister," Rube Amber looked at him coldly, "it's apt to be too bad. I hope you understand what I mean by that."

RUBE AMBER had cut the ropes on the steer, and had leaped into the saddle of his claybank. At a fast run with Jude Amber leading the way on the sorrel, they tore across the flat to westward, the horses leaping over the ravines.

"Keep yore eye on the stranger, Mary!" Jude Amber barked back over his shoulder as he led the way down the trail at a breakneck pace.

It was like a ride straight to hell. Without that devil in the lead, Deeth would have never dared such a pace on such a dangerous trail as this. At times loose shale slid like rattling glass under the feet of the horses. Here and there the ledge swung out into sheer space and overhung a rocky floored canyon a thousand feet below. A drop here meant death.

And there was no halt in the pace. Jude Amber kept setting it. He was like some crazy fool who did not mind dying. They hammered on, going down and down. And when they reached the foot of the ledge, Deeth saw the reason for it.

Shots roared above them. Bullets came down the cliffs, fired from a great crag jutting out into space high overhead. That meant that the gang of riders from Blowing Horn had swept on across the flat and had popped out on the crag to take advantage of the situation down below.

Before he realized what he was doing, Deeth was into it, firing back at the men above him with his carbine, and with his second shot bringing a distant yell from the crag, and the figure of a man reeling out into space. The rest was enough to stop a man's heart from beating.

Mary Amber's pinto bawled, twisted crazily, and went down. Deeth whirled his gray toward her with a growing scream of terror in his ears. It was the dropping man coming down from the ledge, a spinning, wide-eyed thing in the air that came on to strike the ground with a sickening *smack* that instantly brought an end to that one long, lung-bursting wail of terror.

By this time, Deeth had already reached the girl. She had been thrown clear of the falling pinto, and as Deeth swerved in beside her she arose to meet him with her rifle in her hand. With bullets smashing through the brush and rocks around her, he swung the girl up behind him, whirled Graveyard, and darted on, keeping as close to the foot of the cliffs as he possibly could.

But it did not fare so well this time with Jude Amber. Deeth saw the deformed youth swinging suddenly to the right in his saddle. Rube Amber was there to try to catch him, but he was not quick enough. Jude went down, a sprawling, stiff-legged thing going out of his saddle and rolling on the ground. Rube swung his claybank to a halt.

By quick work the man caught Jude's sorrel, swinging the animal around. Rube was out of the saddle then, hastily scooping Jude from the ground and hurling the stiff-legged figure back across the saddle of the sorrel. Rube was back on his claybank then, and again they were riding for it, with Jude like something already dead across his saddle.

It was hell-for-leather after that. Bullets kept whistling all around them, the shots still blazing away from the great crag. In a breathless dash with their horses' bellies dragging the ground, they rounded a bend in the canyon, one that took them out of sight of the crag. Rube Amber slackened the pace, and turned in his saddle to look at the girl and Deeth.

"Yuh shoot well an' yuh ride well, stranger," he grunted, eyes looking straight into Deeth's. "I kinda like yore style. Jude's done for." There was no hint of sorrow in his tone. It was a simple statement of fact. "It's maybe just as well. The pore young 'un had to get it some time, an' with that face an' them legs I reckon he didn't mind. We'll take it easier from now on."

They left the canyon, and again Deeth found himself on a high ledge trail, one that kept climbing until it looked as if it would reach the sky before it came out on a towering, wind-blown plateau.

Corrals and houses could be seen ahead. A grove of pines around a big water hole surrounded them, and as they rode on Deeth saw four riders swing out of the corral and gallop down the plateau. Deeth's pulse quickened as he studied the tall, white-hatted rider in the lead.

HE HAD come here looking for one Rube Amber, supposed bank-robber and killer who had dropped down on Lava Rock one day at noon to split a little town wide-open with his cold-bloodedness. But he had met Rube Amber, and had found it impossible to fit him into the picture of Lava Rock. But now, pounding straight down the plateau, was a man who answered Banker Ludlow's description of Amber to the last detail.

There was something rotten here besides the real Rube Amber's troubles with the Singing Wind men and the Blowing Horn crowd. Mary Amber had told Deeth enough about it. The Singing Wind men had been here more than two years —a mad crew of hellions headed by a Jasper Dunkard and a human terror, a breed called Chink White Cloud, a mixture of Chinese, Indian, Negro and Mexican. He was the man who had handled the knife when Jude Amber had been captured and mutilated, then left for dead on the north rim of Skyland Plateau.

The Ambers had been plain cattlemen

in the beginning, men who had dared the Devil's Cradle with their small herds and had made them grow until the Singing Winders and the Blowing Horners had come in to take over the Cradle.

Mary Amber had skipped the most of it, but it had been enough for Pocatello Dave Deeth; and like a man tossed into a boiling cauldron, he was now finding himself aligned with the Skyland crowd. He had fought for them back there. He had killed a man. At least he had picked him off the high crag with a bullet and started him spinning on his way to death, and for some reason now Lava Rock seemed far, far away. This Devil's Cradle worked swiftly into a man's blood. The spirit of it soon boiled in his veins.

"That's Ira Feldon in the lead." The girl spoke there at Deeth's back, and there was something in her voice that told him she did not trust the man. "The tall ghost behind him is old Bird Shawlee. The short, fat one is Dode Street, and the last one is Slim Slatterly. They ride for Dad."

The men were galloping up and pulling rein in a cloud of dust. Dark eyes stared for a second at Deeth, eyes that were somehow remindful of those a man saw in a snake's head.

"Jude's dead," Rube told the men, bluntly. "We'll bury 'im as soon as we can. The boy's run through enough lead in the past to sink a steamboat. Blowin' Horn was just a shade too much for 'im today. We heard the shots, figured it was him, an' went to see."

He skipped quickly over everything. Feldon had rolled a smoke while the man was talking. Deeth did not like the way the man's hands trembled and spilled the tobacco. He did not like the way Feldon looked at him from time to time. He did not like old Bird Shawlee; and Dode Street and Slim Slattery were no better. There was too much of an air of tenseness about them.

"We'll live it through somehow." Feldon was saying that now. "It has been tough enough as it is. But—but how sure are we of this new man?" He nodded toward Deeth. "It—uh—seems that I've met him somewhere—"

"Down Utah way, probably," cut in Deeth, quietly. "Or maybe," his eyes narrowed as he started going straight to the point to get this thing done, come what would, "maybe it was around Lava Rock. A fellow like you come to town over there one morning. Looked just like you, but he called himself Rube Amber. Bought drinks for men in the Turkey Track Bar, and then, when everybody had quietly gone off for a noonday bite to eat, you sauntered across the street to rob the bank and kill a man. You're still wearing the same clothes—and riding the same horse, Feldon. The only thing that bothers me is to know why you used Rube Amber's name."

IT was a brazen way to go about it—the most dangerous way a man could take. Deeth was watching Feldon's hands while he talked. He was watching the others.

He saw Rube Amber straighten in his saddle, saw the man's mouth sag open. Beyond Amber, he saw the lean, ghost-like face of old Bird Shawlee grow suddenly pale, then wrinkle with a hard smile. The eyes of the other two men widened. They stared at Feldon, then back to Deeth. Feldon's face had turned the color of time-yellowed parchment. He seemed to ease forward in his saddle, hands clasping his saddle horn.

"And the law rides, does it?" His voice was casual.

"The law doesn't ride." Deeth's set eyes did not move. "The man you killed happened to be an old friend of my father's. That's all, Feldon. I—"

"Now all yuh dudes wait!" cut in Rube Amber, and his six-shooters had

suddenly jumped into his hands. "What's all this talk? What's this duck sayin' to yuh, Ira?"

"Plenty, maybe!" To Deeth's surprise, old Bird Shawlee had unholstered his guns and swung his horse to one side. Deeth expected to see Amber open fire on the man, but Amber did not seem to mind the guns.

"The stranger speaks some truth, an' maybe for once, Rube, yo'll sorter believe some of the things I've told yuh in the past. Ira Feldon ain't on the level with us; ain't never been!" The old man's voice was rising excitedly. "It's been Mary he's been after—"

A sudden burst of shots, coming from the ranch houses in the distance behind him, cut Shawlee off. As if it was a signal for him to move, Feldon tried to whirl his horse. Deeth's guns leaped from their holsters, covering the man. Then Rube Amber's voice boomed out a command.

"No gun-play here! Set where yuh are, Ira! Grab 'im, boys!"

Deeth ignored Amber's guns. He leaped off Graveyard, and another leap or two brought him up beside Feldon. Feldon kicked at him, a snarling, yellow-faced crazy man. Deeth leaped upward. One of the six-shooters in his hands smashed across Feldon's face, rocking the man backward in his saddle. Deeth struck again, a wildcat suddenly into action, and an instant later Feldon was dragged to the ground.

"Shootin' 'im woulda been easier," drawled the voice of Shawlee as Deeth stepped back with Feldon's guns in his hands. "Still, we may want 'im, Rube. Might need 'im to knock some sense in yore head. I ain't been able to even talk to yuh an' Jude since that skunk's been fancyin' 'round the Skylan'."

Shots were still sounding at the ranch buildings. For a second now, Feldon was ignored. Amber was staring at the houses. Shawlee did not seem to mind the shooting. He merely looked at Amber with a wry grin wrinkling his old face.

"Don't get yore pants hot, Rube," he drawled again. "The boys back at the house are cleanin' out the rest of the skunks, 'cause, yuh see, Rube, I've been doin' some plottin' agin' yuh myse'f. Ever'-body else was, an' back at the house the five boys I can trust are cleanin' out six others what nobody but a fool like Rube Amber could trust. While all the jawin' was goin' on here, I eased outa my saddle an' sorter tightened my cinch. That was the signal, an' one of the boys at the house was watchin'.

"The Blowin' Horn bunch," he grinned now, "are goin' to do some house cleanin' tonight. That bunch ain't all bad, but I could never make yuh an' Jude believe it. Singin' Wind men are among 'em, fellas in the pay of Jasper Dunkard an' Chink White Cloud. Jasper's yore brother, Ira. Yeah, that's right, but listen, rooster, don't try goin' for that short gun yuh carry inside yore bosom." His old eyes narrowed. "It won't work. I'm still holdin' the drop on yuh, an' I know that yuh robbed the bank in Lava Rock. Hell, smart fella, I've been follow'in yuh at night when yuh met Jasper an' Chink. Yuh didn't know I'd learned of yore meetin' place—didn't know I was there last night. Yuh robbed that bank to get money to pay Jasper an' Chink's fightin' polecats. Yuh used Rube's name to put 'im in bad over there. After Jasper took over the Cradle, folks in Lava Rock woulda been glad he'd put Rube outa the way. But the jig's up. Tonight the damndest fight yuh ever heard about is goin' to take place on Skylan' Plateau. I've sent word to the Blowin' Horners to pass the signal.

"Now boys," he straightened slightly in his saddle, "wrop a couple of ropes 'round this skunk, an' we'll ride on to the house. I'd like some supper 'fore hell breaks loose."

IT came at midnight. The houses were dark. Jude Amber's body lay on a table in the old-fashioned room with its high log walls, and a snarling prisoner sat in the corner.

There had been a system to it. At nine o'clock a great pile of brush had started to burn on the side of a high peak east of Skyland Plateau. An hour later six heavily armed men had ridden up to the big house there under the trees beside the water hole. There had been a great deal of talk and explaining. They were Blowing Horn men, and Deeth readily saw that Old Bird Shawlee knew how to handle them. The old man had even made the handsome prisoner in the corner talk for them. It had taken a little coaxing, like the ugly business of a lighted cigarette stuck to the end of the prisoner's nose a few times.

At midnight there was no warning. Thundering hoofs started drumming through the darkness along the plateau. A blaze of gunfire ringed the ranch house and corrals, a sudden gashing, splintering and crashing of red ribbons of jumpy light that thudded the log walls full of bullets; and rising to meet it, every gun in the house started roaring.

"Keep your fire on the inside circle of men!" hissed Shawlee. "Other Blowin' Horners will soon make an outer circle, an' we'll have them between two fires."

It was a siege as far as the main house was concerned, and it was a red hell battlefield out there in the darkness. Soon a second ring of blazing lights appeared. The outer ring of Blowing Horn men was in action. It brought yells and curses from the ring of riding men inside the outer circle. They were caught from both sides, like rats teased to slaughter. Snarling and yelling men piled out of their saddles. Some tried to break away. The Blowing Horn men in the outer circle drove them back or shot them down.

There was no quarter, for the devil himself could not have held the Blowing Horners and the Skylanders now.

"An' that's the way to get a thing done!" yelled Old Bird Shawlee in Deeth's ear within thirty minutes after the fight had started. "A wipe-out, plum clean!"

It was over, the quickest and the most savage thing Pocotello Dave Deeth had ever seen. He went outside when the shots died away, and left his prisoner under the close guard of a Blowing Horn man.

Even the high, clear air seemed tainted with the smell of burned powder and blood, then a trim figure came out of the darkness and halted beside Deeth. A small hand reached up, and closed on his arm. Mary Amber spoke, her voice low and muted with a sob as a tear slipped down her cheek.

"It was beautiful here before they came; it will be beautiful again. Oh, so high and clear and shining. I—I used to think we were living next door to Heaven."

"Mary, it is next door to Heaven!" Deeth turned and caught her by the shoulders, looking down into her shining eyes. "With quiet and peace restored, there will be no place in all the land like it. When morning comes and I've had a few hours' sleep, I'm heading back for Lava Rock with that killer in there. Maybe even your father and old Bird will go along with me to clear up things. Couldn't you come along with me, too, Mary? Maybe—maybe you can find out more about me. Maybe I can take you down to see my mother. Because, you see, Mary, as soon as I'm free of my prisoner, I'm—I'm coming back to Skyland—whether you come with me to Lava Rock or not. . . ."

# RANGE-HOGS

By STONE CODY

**Because his father was a meek, poverty-hounded rancher who'd thank a man for stepping on his toes, young Phil Burchard figured the only way to win out was to keep his own gun ready to take up a range-hog's deadly argument—and to copper his bet with his own empty, waiting grave!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Rendezvous With Death

PHIL BURCHARD rode away from the Slash A ranch house with a white line of fury about his mouth corners, and that familiar, frustrated anger, which had gathered almost uncontrollable force with the years, seething within him. It was fury against the bitter poverty he had always known; against his father whom he held responsible for it, and finally against himself—because his pride prevented him from taking the thing he most wanted.

Sally Corbin hadn't understood any of that, of course. He had never told anybody how he felt toward his father. Nor how he felt about the miserable, two-for-a nickel cattle spread which was his inheritance. So he had never even spoken a word of love to Sally.

Maybe she had guessed that his pride had something to do with that. Otherwise, she wouldn't have taken the initiative the way she had today.

He shut his eyes, gritting his teeth, at the memory of the way she had come close to him and said "Phil. . . ." with her face uptilted to his and the message of her eyes unmistakable.

He had stood there with his arms rigid at his side and his face as blank as smooth

granite, until she had turned away, her cheeks burning, a hint of the shame she felt in the straightening of her shoulders.

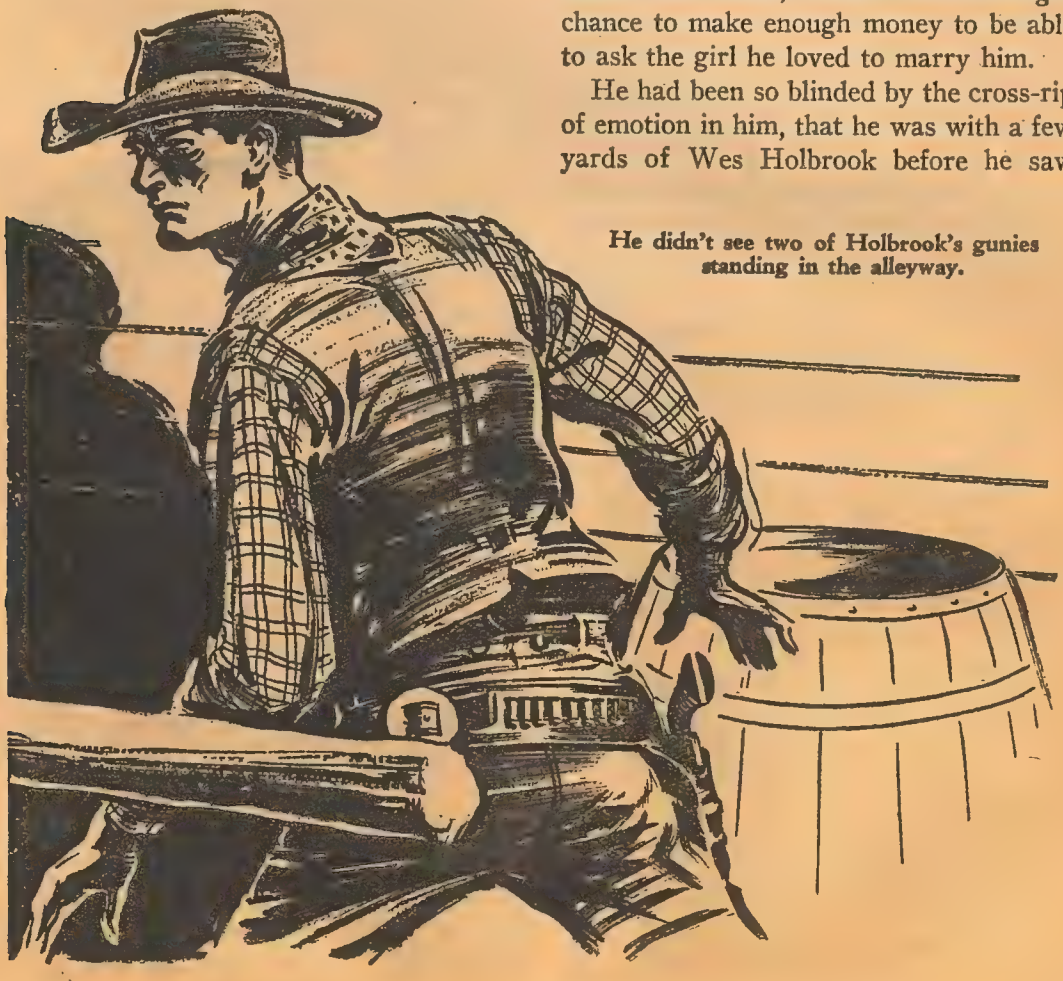
And because he wanted her more than anything, and had hurt her, he rode away with the old anger against his father boiling up in him to volcanic pitch.

That fierce resentment had begun when his mother died—died, as Phil believed, from poverty and overwork and worry. Part of him had begun to hate his father then, and the resentment had grown with the years.

Maybe it had actually been made worse by the fact that Ben Burchard was not the kind of man anybody could really hate. He was too mild, even-tempered and kindly to inspire such an emotion in anyone else.

Yet it was just those qualities which Phil loathed, for in them he recognized the qualities that kept him from getting ahead. And there was a stubbornness in Ben Burchard, too, which had tried to impose the same qualities on his son. He was such a fanatic about law and order and the peaceful ways of doing things that Phil had never even been allowed to wear a sixgun—was supposed not even to know how to use one. He had been forced to stick on that miserable tumbled down ranch, without ever having a chance to follow his dreams, without even having a chance to make enough money to be able to ask the girl he loved to marry him.

He had been so blinded by the cross-rip of emotion in him, that he was with a few yards of Wes Holbrook before he saw



**He didn't see two of Holbrook's gunies standing in the alleyway.**

him. He didn't see him at all, in fact, until Holbrook's hard voice struck out at him. "Hey, you! Did you leave this gate open?"

Phil came to life with suddenness of a shaken sleepwalker. The scene wheeled before his eyes and clicked into place with an etched clarity.

Holbrook was by the gate which shut off what had formerly been Ben and Phil Burchard's southeast water hole. It no longer was, because Wes Holbrook had jumped it, and fenced it off. Now, somebody had left the gate open and some Burchard Two B cattle had gone through to their old water.

It was one of Phil's grievances against his father that Ben Burchard had been unwilling to fight for this water.

For just an instant, as he looked at Holbrook's hard, angry face, caution touched him. He knew he had a chance to start something here that wouldn't finish soon, and he knew his father would not like it. But the caution was no more than a flash, instantly swept away by the piled up force of his rage, which had now some chance of an outlet. His raw, temper whipped nerves spoke for him.

"An' if I did—?" he demanded, his voice rasping, deliberately contemptuous.

The H Bar H owner rapped out, "Your damn cows—"

"—went through to my damn water," Phil cut in. "What of it, range hog?"

Dark color stained Holbrook's stubbled cheeks. "Why you damn wet-nose!" he exploded. "Don't talk like that to me, or—"

Phil leaned forward, his hot, tawny eyes boring into the black ones before him. "How should I talk to a thief?" he asked.

HE HAD meant to make his tone soft and coldly insulting, but his voice shook suddenly under the released flood of his rage.

Holbrook's hand whipped to his gun, and the heavy Colt jumped from its holster, the hammer eared back, the muzzle leveled at Phil's middle.

Coldness touched him there, and in the bright, chill clarity of that moment, he knew that he had deliberately invited a killing and was closer to death than he ever had been.

Yet some thread of restraint in Holbrook held that hammer back an instant. Phil said quickly, "So you're going to add murder to it, Holbrook?" His hands rested on the saddle horn. "You know I ain't heeled, but are you as sure your punchers here will witness for you?"

"You yeller-bellied pup!" Holbrook snarled. "You come out full of lip, an' then whine about not carryin' a gun!"

Temper whipped up in Phil, the stronger now because he had been scared. "Don't worry," he cut in, "I'll be wearin' one the next time you see me."

"An' I'll shoot you loose from your backbone," Wes Holbrook promised.

Phil's eyes blazed. "I'll be in town tonight to give you a chance," he flung back. He whirled his horse and rode off without looking back.

For a few minutes he rode blindly toward home, savage satisfaction mingling with his anger. But presently he sobered and turned off the trail, toward the box canyon where he had cached the guns he was forbidden to own.

He had done it now, he told himself bitterly. He had put himself into a gunfight from which there could be no backing down. Three of Holbrook's punchers had witnessed the quarrel, so Holbrook could not afford to avoid town that night, even if he wanted to. Nor could Phil. Would he be fast enough . . . . Or would he be dead before the night was over?

Yet his nerves were steady when he got to the canyon, dismounted beside a sheer lift of scarp and took the guns out from behind the rock niche that hid them.

He had had them since he was sixteen, and he had worked hard over his draw and at learning to shoot straight. And he had an idea that he was unusually fast. It almost seemed as though he had been born with a kind of gun-talent. And that was strange in the son of a man who wouldn't fight, who hated guns so much he wouldn't even own one.

He cleaned the guns carefully, loaded them with fresh shells and stowed them away in his saddle bags. Then he mounted and rode slowly toward his own range. By the time he was in sight of the ranch, doubt had him by the throat.

He tried to shake it off, tried to summon his recent rage to his aid, but he was unable to rid himself of that cold and growing sense of guilt.

It was familiar, that feeling—the guilt and the fear which mingled so often with his anger against his father. And now it was enormously complicated by the fact that he had taken things into his own hands. He'd be plunging his father into a situation which might ruin him, destroy everything Ben Burchard believed in, had lived and, in his own way, had fought for.

Stubbornly, he shook the thought off but with equal persistence his nervousness returned. And then, while he was off-saddling, a memory which he had been suppressing all this time surged up into his mind—the memory of his mother's ravaged, gentle face as she lay dying, and her gentle voice saying, "You'll stand by your father, won't you, boy? He—he'll need you now."

His own choked, nine-year-old voice had replied, "Yes, Mom."

His hands shook suddenly as he swung the saddle to the corral fence. Was a promise made by a nine-year-old binding? And for how long?

DRY-LIPPED, he told himself that within a few weeks he would be twenty-one. He had a right to live his own life then. Those words had kept him too long bound to a way of life he hated. And besides, just what had they meant? He was standing by his father, wasn't he? Not even his mother could have meant that he must slavishly obey his father's wishes even after he had grown to manhood.

He stood there by the corral fence fighting for control of himself until his father's voice reached him. "Hello, boy."

The voice was warm, alive with the quiet affection it always held for him. He had been so preoccupied that he had not heard the hoofs of the roan coming up behind him. He did not start, but something jumped guiltily inside his breast.

He turned and said, "Hullo, Dad."

The familiar shadow came deep back in his father's eyes. It was only there for a fleeting instant, then the clarity and the warmth were quick in them again. It made him feel bad, as it always did. His father was always looking for some response from him that he could not give—never had been able to give—and when it was not there, always that swift shadow of disappointment and hurt came in the warm, patient, gray-blue eyes. Then it was gone, as though it had not been.

Ben Burchard swung down from the saddle, his movement lithe and easy. A lean wide-shouldered man, grayed about the temples, his face lined by work.

"How're things?" Ben Burchard asked easily. "You look kind of riled."

Phil hadn't meant to say anything about Wes Holbrook, but now it burst out. "Somebody left the gate open by the water hole an' Holbrook jumped me because some of our cows went through."

## CHAPTER TWO

### "Go for Your Iron!"

FOR an instant, Ben Burchard's mouth tightened, then his face cleared. "Oh, well," he said easily, "it ain't a thing that's

liable to happen often. Some pilgrim come through, I reckon, an' was careless."

"Gosh!" Phil flared at him. "You take it easy! It's our water hole, ain't it? Why do we let him keep it at all?"

His father shrugged.

"It ain't worth fightin' over. The fact is, we don't hardly need it at all. Feed's better on the upper range an' we've got water up there. I've been meanin' to drive that bunch up higher anyway. We'll do it tomorrer, an' then we won't be tangling with Wes again."

Phil drew a long quivering breath, trying to steady himself against the quick, outraged anger that flooded him.

"But, damn it, Dad, it's our water, ain't it?" he burst out. "It's on our land, ain't it?"

The shadow of a smile edged his father's lips.

"It was on our land and it was our water," he corrected. "Possession ain't only nine points of the law—it's liable to be ten points of the fact."

"You aren't even goin' to law about it," Phil charged hotly.

"It would cost more than it's worth. We'd be busted, win or lose. Wes figured that before he jumped the hole."

"I don't see how you can sit here an' take it. If I had my way, we'd go up there an' tear up that fence an' deal hot lead to anybody that tried to stop us."

His father's eyes were patient. "We been over this, Phil. I don't figure I'd like to kill any human man over water I don't need. An' the chances are the killin' would be the other way around. Wes has got us three to one."

He looked out over the range, the gray-blue of his eyes darkened and thoughtful. "Things ain't always just," he said slowly. "A drought ain't just, nor a blizzard. An' the way luck runs don't change itself for wishes. It's a thing a man's got to learn. Sometimes there's not much more use in buckin' human orneriness than there is in cussin' the weather. Killin' breeds killin'. I never saw much gained by it, an' I've seen plenty lost."

His gaze darkened still further and grew remote, filled by an old pain. "Your mother knew that," he said softly.

PHIL thought bitterly, "You killed her. You didn't have git up an' git enough to take care of her. You brought her out on this miserable spread an' worked her to death." But he didn't say it aloud.

Instead, he said angrily, "You never get anywhere by layin' down all the time."

"Getting ain't everything," his father said impatiently. "It's how you go along the way that matters. An' a real fighting man accepts the things he can't help an' keeps tryin' just the same." He was silent, then: "You think I've kept you down an' just about ruined your life, don't you, son?" his father asked suddenly, surprisingly. "An' maybe I have. I've wanted to raise you like your mother would have wanted. But in three weeks now, you'll be a man grown. You'll be able to do what you want. I won't try to keep you then. A colt has got to feel his oats I reckon, an' a man makes his own mistakes." Then he added, cheerfully casual, "Reckon I'll stir up a little grub," and went on into the house.

They ate in silence. Afterward, Phil got up and put on his hat. "Think I'll ride into town for a spell," he said.

Phil rode off with a leadenness weighing him down. He wished he had waited before starting anything with Wes Holbrook, but it was too late now. He couldn't back out after what had been said that morning.

In town, he put up his horse before the Acme Saloon, deciding that he could do with a drink. He never did drink, but tonight he felt the need of one badly.

"Damn if I know why I feel so bad," he said under his breath.

But he did know, and suddenly he got

it into words. "It's as though I was going to kill *him—Ben!*" he muttered.

Instantly, the back of his throat was dry and his stomach felt cold and twisted. He looked at the saloon door a long moment, then shook his head. He knew that he had to do this—if he was going to do it —sober—without even one drink to warm him.

And then, abruptly, Wes Holbrook was there.

HE CAME up the street, walking, and the same three punchers were with him.

"This mornin' you called me a thief, Burchard," he called, from ten paces away. "What about it now?"

It seemed to Phil that it took him a long time to say anything. He tried to answer right away, but the words stuck and the muscles of his throat moved slowly. Everything about that scene seemed to him to be taking place in slow motion. The movement of a passerby, who took one endless stride and then came to a frozen halt on the boardwalk to the left. The stomp of a horse at the hitchrack. The extreme deliberation with which one of the H Bar H punchers spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust of the street. It was all slow and remote, as though it took place in some strange world, where nothing happened fast but where everything was informed by an extreme brilliance and clarity.

When his voice did come, it sounded far away. "I said it then, and I say it now. You're a damn thief, Holbrook!"

"It's a word I don't take from anybody," Holbrook's voice was loud. "Go for your gun!"

His mind told him that this was all regulation—said loud and clear to make it a fair gunfight. Holbrook was being careful that no blame would come to him afterward. He must be sure of himself, sure of his kill.

Even then, Phil waited a fraction of a second. Then his right hand moved without any volition of his own. He felt it slap the butt of his Colt fast and true, the moisture on his palm not making it slip any. He saw Holbrook's gun-hand flash and come up, death-freighted. But his own gun was already up, the hammer falling. Muzzle flame slashed the half-lighted dark of the street. The buck of the gun was a solid thing in his hand.

He saw Wes Holbrook's body jerk and his jaw drop as though sheer amazement had shocked him rather than a bullet. Then his sixgun dropped from his hand and he went down, his waist folding over as his knees buckled.

Phil slid his gun back into holster, feeling nothing, and turned, finding himself face to face with Sally Corbin.

"Oh, Phil," she breathed. "I was so frightened." Her face was deathly pale.

"It's—it's all right, Sally," he said, mechanically.

But she was no longer looking at him. She had turned and was staring at Holbrook's motionless form. "He—he's dead!" she said wonderingly, and then covered her face swiftly with her hands. "How could you?" she cried suddenly. "Oh, how could you!"

Phil stared at her, shocked by this illogical feminine about-face. First she had been scared about him. Now she was blaming him.

Other faces, voices, were around him. Men he knew talked to him with a new note of friendliness and respect in their voices. There was the sheriff, satisfied after a few questions. Then he was astride his horse, on the way home, and violently sick at his stomach.

He was still pale, but he was hard-eyed when he walked into the house and said, "I've just killed Wes Holbrook."

He expected his father to go up in the air, and his whole body was braced against it. Instead, Ben Burchard's lean, lined

face merely grew quite still. His eyes flicked to the gun-belts crossed on Phil's hips, with the holsters tied low at the thighs, then back to his son's face.

"I'm sorry things had to turn that way," he said quietly.

"It was a fair fight," Phil said, his voice sounding loud and aggressive in his own ears.

"It couldn't have been any other way with you, I know," his father said, still quiet.

SOMEHOW, it angered Phil. He had come primed for a quarrel. That way, it would have been easier to declare himself and put into execution his plan for getting away. He had made up his mind on that ride home that he was not going to rot any longer on this cow-spread. He was going away and make some money.

Just how, he wasn't sure. Maybe as a lawman. He had just shown that his gun-hand was good enough for that. But if not that way, then in another. He was going to make enough so that when he met another girl he wanted, he could ask her to marry him and not kill her with hard work and poverty as his father had done his mother.

Sally Corbin, he told himself grimly, was lost to him. He had seen the terror and something like revulsion in her eyes as she looked at him there in town. Well, all right. His kind of man needed another kind of woman—one that wouldn't go into a dither and hate him if he had to kill some hombre who was walking on his toes.

Suddenly now, he felt deflated and exhausted. "It was a thing I couldn't help," he muttered wearily.

"A man meets things like that," his father said, slowly. "I'm just sorry for it, because I know what you're goin' to be up against from now on." He shrugged. "Well, no use cryin' over spilt milk. Let's get some sleep."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Trap Is Sprung!

PHIL heard his words, but it wasn't until three weeks had passed that he had any real inkling of their meaning.

By that time Wes Holbrook's brother had come to take over his spread, and it hadn't taken him long to show that he was worse—a lot worse—than the man Phil had killed.

Snake Holbrook would have been a dead ringer for Wes, if it hadn't been that his lips were thinner and his eyes, which were closer set, had a shifty meanness in them that was unlike the hard straightness of his brother's gaze.

He came packing a couple of private gunmen with him, and he made no secret of his intentions in regard to the Burchards.

"I hear you're gun-fast," he told Phil the first day he saw him. "Maybe, at that, you'll find that I can shade you some. But you ain't goin' to talk me into no gun-fight. That'd be too fast an' easy for you. I'm goin' to get you slow, an' get your old man, for good measure. I'm goin' to break you an' make bums of you. When I've done that, I'll put your old man in the pen. But not you. In my own good time, I'll kill you."

Phil stared at him bleakly, his lips flat and tight. "Maybe I'll do the killin' first, Holbrook," he said.

Snake Holbrook's slit of a mouth twisted. "You ain't up to murder," he said shrewdly. "I've got you where the hair's short, friend."

And then it began.

The fence at the water hole went back up. It went up with outguards spread fanwise onto Burchard land so that nobody could get through to the workers without taking on a quartette of ambushed Winchesters.

Phil wanted to fight but Ben Burchard shook his head. "It never was worth it,"

he insisted stubbornly, "an' now the odds are too big. Nobody but a fool would try it."

It was true. That pair of gunies Snake Holbrook had brought with him somehow made all the difference. Snake had fired only one of his brother's old hands and he had replaced him with another man. It brought the number of his whole crew up to eight, which was plenty against the meager two the Burchards made.

But there was more to it than that. The new hand resembled the two gunies. The mark of the renegade was on him. They made a tough trio, with a cold deadliness in them. It didn't take much perception to see that they had about as much conscience and mercy as so many wolverines. And that raised the odds, somehow, to a lot higher than eight to two.

Eight to one, Phil told himself bitterly, for Ben couldn't be counted on for anything.

Then the rustling began. Not many cows at a time, but the Burchard herd was too small to stand losses. And these losses were steady—a dribble, but maddening and destructive.

Sometimes the cows just disappeared into the hills, as though they had taken wings. Others times, a missing bunch would be discovered way up in the breaks, where it was next to impossible to chouse them out. Again, a dead steer would be found at the bottom of a ravine, legs or neck broken.

Phil ground his teeth and seethed with impotent rage. He took to riding his range night and day. He grew gaunt, his eyes hollow and red-rimmed. He rode the few horses of their cavvy—until their ribs showed and their hipbones could have been used for hatracks—without result.

Once, only, he thought he had come on something. Cattle tracks leading toward the hills, with the shod hoofs of a horse showing that they had been driven. The sign was not fresh. He figured that it must be eight or ten hours old, so he followed it at a running trot, without caution.

Something whined at him in a vicious, lifting crescendo that ended in a spat, and his Stetson jerked on his head.

He hit the ground with the flat crack of the Winchester in his ears and rolled to cover.

HE SAW gray smoke lift from a brushy chimney of rock ahead and cursed because he had not had time to drag his carbine from the saddle. His horse had gone on a few yards and now was cropping the sparse grass at the side of the trail. He was in the open, so there was no chance of getting the rifle.

But Phil still had his sixguns. He began to crawl, keeping under cover, circling to get the other side of the rock chimney under his guns. He knew that he made a target from time to time and that the rifleman must be able to follow his progress, but he was white-lipped with the anger that had ridden him for weeks and it was not in him to pass up this chance to kill one of his enemies.

But no further shots came, and before he had covered half the distance, a very faint sound of galloping hoofs let him guess that the dry-gulcher was on his way. It proved to be so, and the trail was too faint and intermittent to follow.

It was not until he had given it up, with fury and the sense of frustration almost choking him, that the idea came to him that he had been played with. That cattle trail had been a planned decoy. And the rifle shot had not been meant to kill but only to worry him. The hole in the crown of his hat was dead center. It had been put there by a rifleman who could have placed it between his eyes as easily as not.

He was being harried, taunted, played with, as a cat plays with a mouse before the kill.

For the first time, something like fear invaded him—a queer, sickening sense of absolute helplessness. Mercilessly, coldly, Snake Holbrook was going ahead with his announced program. It wouldn't be long before the Burchards would be broke. Would Ben be framed into jail then? Certainly, he, Phil, would be killed. Snake Holbrook could get him anytime he wanted to. This abortive drygulching was proof of that—and had been meant to be proof of it!

For a moment, the wild idea rode him to drive for H Bar H headquarters and shoot it out with Holbrook. But that, of course, was sheer insanity.

He thought of making a report of the incident to the sheriff, but then set his lips tight and decided not to say anything to anyone. He wouldn't give Holbrook that satisfaction.

It would have been useless, anyway, he knew. When they had first begun to lose cattle Ben had reported it to Mitch Conroy and the lawman had ridden out to make an investigation that had come to nothing. Holbrook was covering his tracks too well. If Phil, who was constantly in the saddle, could not catch him, it wasn't likely that the sheriff would. He had other business to occupy him.

And least of all did he wish to say anything to his father.

His feelings toward Ben had not changed. They had only been intensified by the sense that he, Phil, had been put in the wrong. His father's silent unvarying kindness was an almost unendurable reproach to him. He hated him—hated him because he was an uncomplaining victim of his—Phil's—acts. He hated him because his presence was a kind of eternal "I told you so," and finally he hated him for the sheeplike patience which kept him from uttering even a word of condemnation. Hated him because he was right, and yet, somehow, wrong, in not going to war with Snake Holbrook.

The injustice of the thing was hardest to bear. Wes Holbrook had jumped their water and fenced it in, and then when Phil showed signs of resistance had taunted him into a gunfight. He had deserved the killing he got. Why should his crooked, murderous brother be allowed to take up the fight as though he had a right to vengeance?

There was something to do about it. There had to be something to do about it. So he repeated over and over to himself. But he could think of nothing. He was trapped—licked!

AND then, at last, he got a break. An H Bar H hand rode into the ranch yard the next day at dusk—a man named Curtis, whom Phil knew slightly and judged to be the best of the lot over there.

"Well?" Phil's greeting was harsh.

"Take it easy," the puncher murmured. "I'm not on the warpath none."

"Maybe," Phil answered curtly. "I'm not puttin' much stock in anything that comes from H Bar H."

"'Comes from' is right," Curtis said grimly. "I'm quittin'. There are some things I can stand, but there's others I can't. Snake Holbrook has reported to the sheriff that he's losin' cows. That mean anythin' to you?"

Phil stiffened, suddenly alert.

"I don't know what the frame's to be," the H Bar H hand went on, tight-lipped, "but I ain't havin' any. I've done some things in my time, but, by God, I ain't havin' any hand in framin' an innocent man into prison or a rope. An' I told Snake Holbrook so. I'm drawin' my time tomorrow an' hittin' the trail. I just thought I'd ride over before it got too late an' tell you to watch your step. I'm sorry I can't tell you more. I kind of lost my temper an' talked before I had found it all out."

Phil watched him ride away, frowning.

He had sounded honest, and this thing dovetailed with what Snake Holbrook had said he was going to do. Yet he couldn't be sure. It might be some kind of a trick.

He went in and told his father about it, stiffly, reluctantly, because he had to be warned.

"We'll have to keep an eye out," Ben Burchard shrugged. "If what Curtis says is true, it may be luck for us. It might turn out that Holbrook is bitin' off more than he can chew. A thing like that is liable to backfire. I don't say that some innocent men haven't been convicted, but it ain't so easy to frame a man as all that. An' tryin' it is risky for the framer."

Phil had to acknowledge that it was true, and also that there was nothing to be done. He thought of suggesting that they ride together from then on, but he knew the work did not permit that, and besides, his pride was against it.

He and Ben separated the next morning as usual, but Phil, driven by an obscure anxiety, got back to the ranch before noon. There was a horse by the corral fence—Sally Corbin's paint!

She came out of the door of the ranch house as he rode up, and despite himself his heart jumped and pounded against his ribs. There was something about the sight of this slim, supple, high-headed girl coming out of his own house that put longing and a pain into him. Then he saw that her eyes were strained and anxious.

"Phil," she said, "they—they've arrested Ben."

He flung himself out of the saddle, facing her, taut, eyes blazing. "Holbrook?" he ripped out. "What for? How'd they get him?"

She looked at him, not answering for a moment, her eyes enormous in a face which was now almost without color. Her hands, at her side, made a little, unconscious, tortured movement.

"Yes," she said after a moment, "Holbrook did it. The charge is rustling and —murder."

"Murder?" His voice came out of him in a kind of harsh croak.

"Holbrook and his—his men—say they caught him branding a H Bar H calf, and that he killed one of them. A man named Curtis."

Curtis! Phil's mind was recovering from the first shock. They had killed Curtis—killed him to frame Ben. They must have found out that Curtis had come to give warning yesterday.

"We ought to have thought of it!" he said hoarsely. "They couldn't let him live to testify against them when they finally pulled the frame." His blazing gaze drilled at the girl. "What happened? How'd they do it? We've got to get Ben out."

She drew a long, shaken breath. "It's bad, Phil," she said unsteadily. "There are four of them to witness against Ben. They say they were riding the range—five of them together—because they suspected you and your father of stealing their cattle. They set a trap for Ben, spread out and hid. He came into it and started to brand the calf. Curtis was nearest to him. He waited until the brand was on and then stepped out, with his gun in his hand. He told your father to put his hands up. About that time the rest of them were getting up but your father didn't see them. He whipped his rifle up and killed Curtis. Holbrook shot at your father, to stop him, but he was too late. His bullet, though, hit Ben's rifle and knocked it out of his hands. Then they captured him."

Every sentence of the story was like blow against his brain. The end of it left him numb, with only one thought hammering dully within his skull. They had Ben, then—had him tight and sure. They had done it the simple way—had captured him, had killed Curtis with his rifle, shot at the rifle so as to show a bullet scar, branded one of their own calves, and

brought the calf and running iron and Ben, with his rifle, in to the sheriff.

So long as all four of them stuck to that story, there was no chance at all to keep Ben from a hanging. And they would stick to it, because they were all involved —all equally guilty of Curtis' murder.

There was only one chance. He had to get Ben out of jail. They could get away, leave the country, start over again. South America, maybe, or Mexico. . . .

He whipped about, swung into the saddle. "Where—where are you going?" Sally asked anxiously.

"To see Ben," he said briefly. And he pounded down the trail to town.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Into the Snake's Nest

IT WAS easy enough to see Ben. The sheriff, looking thoughtful and somehow worried, took his guns, made him turn out his pockets and then let him in and left him.

His father said, "Hello, boy. Looks like Holbrook had put it over, doesn't it?"

Phil said tautly, "Tell me what happened."

It was no surprise to him to learn that the thing had happened just as he had imagined it. They had ridden up to Ben openly, thrown guns on him, and then set the stage. Curtis was still alive at that time, tied up with soft cloths so as not to leave a mark on his wrists. They had killed him under Ben's eyes.

He had, of course, told his story to the sheriff, and, according to him, gotten more credence than he had expected. But the lawman had held out little hope. The testimony of the four would stand up in court, and the thing had been so carefully done that there was no loophole in the physical evidence. Even in regard to timing, Snake Holbrook had been shrewd.

Ben and Phil had been losing cattle. They were known to be at odds with H Bar H. It would be natural to think that Ben, desperate, had decided to recoup his losses from the man he suspected of being responsible for them. The H Bar H story would, therefore, be believed. The best Ben could expect was a long prison term. Maybe a hanging.

"Then you've got to get out of here," Phil said fiercely. "I'll see to that."

"No you won't," Ben said quickly. "I won't escape, so you'd be wastin' your time."

Phil stared at him. Somehow, he had not expected this. "Listen," he said, angrily. "This is my fault. You've got to let me do what I can about it. We can hit for the Border and make a new start. We haven't got much left here, anyway."

"We have an unmortgaged spread an' some cattle," Ben said grimly. "That's plenty for anybody. You keep out of this, son. Just take it easy. I'm not goin' out of this jail until I'm turned loose, open an' official."

"God!" Phil flared. "I knew you took things lyin' down, but I didn't count on this."

"Quit swearin'," his father told him curtly. "I've told you before that I live by the law. The law's the only thing that's made this country fit to live in. Forget it, son."

Phil went out into the afternoon sunlight with his face graven in immobility and his eyes blind with hurt and anger.

HE CLIMBED into the saddle and rode out of town, not because he had anywhere to go but merely because it helped to ride.

This last blow, coming on top of what he had suffered in the past weeks, was too much for him to handle. Even now, it did not occur to him to think how much he cared about his father.

He was too used to believing that he almost hated him, to understand that the intensity of those feelings were only the

other face of his fierce love for the lean, kindly, patient man who had reared him.

And now, all he felt was that the thing was his responsibility, not at all understanding that it was this same passionate affection and loyalty which was driving him. It was his fault, and there was nothing he could do!

Nothing? His head jerked up suddenly, his narrowed eyes beginning to blaze. Yes, there was one thing—one last thing. He could at least try to break this case in the way he had started it. He could kill Snake Holbrook for the treacherous murderer, that he was. He could kill Snake and as many of the other witnesses as possible. He'd die doing it, but maybe when it was done, somebody would break and tell the truth.

Once the leader was dead, the others would have nothing to gain. Somebody would think it better to talk and clear his skirts, blaming the murder of Curtis on the dead Holbrook, asserting that he himself had not known that murder was intended. Hired cattle hands were not, as a matter of custom, often blamed for obeying the orders of their bosses.

He swung his horse's head sharp to the left, angling across the range toward the H Bar H. He'd ride into the snake's nest, and carry war and death with him.

Far to his left, after he had gotten onto H Bar H range, a gunshot sounded, and a tiny figure, perched atop a flat butte, waved at him. Sally Corbin. In the clear light he could recognize her paint pony and the white gleam of her shirt.

For a moment he hesitated, then rode on at a faster pace. Sally would only try to interfere with him, and he had no time to waste.

At the H Bar H, he found the ranch yard deserted, except for the cook. Holbrook, he learned, had ridden into town. He, Phil, had crossed the range at an angle from the straight road to town and so had missed the H Bar H crowd. He cursed himself for not having made up his mind earlier. In that case, he'd have met them on the road and the whole thing would be over by now.

He swung his horse again and started toward town. But the memory of Sally caused him to swing off the trail and detour a little so as to miss her. There was a heaviness in him already, sapping his courage, at the thought that it was really final now that he could not ever have her. Dead men do not marry.

And then the long shadows of sundown were running across the street as he spurred a tired horse into town.

THE livery stable not far from the end of the main street. He dismounted there, slapping his mount into the doorway, with a brief word to the hostler, and then began to walk up the street.

He walked in the center, feeling the weight of the Colts heavy on his thighs, and walking in a circle of silence broken only by the rub of leather against his clothes and the muffled clinking of his spurs in the dust.

Dimly he was aware of the quick, curious stares of the people he passed and of the quiet that fell over them as they looked at his face and the set of his body.

Up the street, in front of the Acme, he could see the H Bar H horses, half a dozen of them, maybe, and Holbrook's star-faced bay among them. They were in the saloon. He'd only have to walk in and begin the play. He'd have to be fast, because in that confined space there wouldn't be room for dodging or taking cover. He'd have to get Holbrook with the first shot.

And then, two doors from the saloon, he saw two of Holbrook's gunies in the shadows. He stiffened a little at the sight, but the significance of it did not dawn on him at once. He only thought that it was luck. If he hurried, the men might not get into the saloon in time to join in the fight. Then he saw two things at once, and he

knew that he had made a terrible mistake.

One was the tough new puncher Holbrook had hired. He was standing across the street, almost opposite the gunies in the alley. The other was Snake Holbrook himself, coming out of the Acme with a man behind him.

A guntrap! They must have been watching for him to come into town. Somebody had run with the news. But how had they known that he meant to start a fight? He had told nobody.

Then, suddenly, his mind gave him the answer to that and at the same time brought him a queer feeling of relief. They hadn't known. Snake Holbrook had planned to kill him, anyway. He had threatened to do it in his own time, and this was his time, and his way. He meant now to force a fight, and when Phil went for his guns, the two men flanking him would already have their guns drawn. He'd be cut down before he could fire.

Only, there had been one little piece of luck for Phil. The timing had been just a little wrong. Holbrook was still fifty feet away and the first gunie was still in range of Phil's vision, and so they did not yet have their guns out.

Phil stopped dead. "Holbrook, you murderin', double-crossin' snake," he called out, "Go for your gun!"

With the words his hands blurred downward. Vaguely, as though from a great distance, he heard a frantic feminine voice crying out, "No, Phil! Wait!" And a masculine shout mingling with it.

But that was happening somewhere in another world, and was of no importance. The only world he knew now was the electric, flashing flow of his hand down and up, Snake Holbrook's startled curse and the frantic stab of his gun-hand, and the off-guard stiffening of the gunies on either boardwalk. They were wasting a split second in starting their draws, because their minds did not adjust quickly enough to the changed situation.

The slap of his guns against his hands was as though he had been leaning against a wall which jarred toward him. Then they filled the street with one single blasting bellow, a bellow which Snake Holbrook's gun echoed, slamming into the dust at Phil's feet, because Holbrook's body had stiffened, halting his up-levelling muzzle in just that place. In that late, clear light, Phil could see the two puffs of dust from his enemy's shirt as his twin bullets slapped home.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Son of a Gunman

PHIL was moving, even before Snake Holbrook began to fall. He jumped backward one pace and swung his muzzle toward the gunies in the alleyway.

But something like the kick of a mule slammed Phil in the ribs just as he fired at the men and he missed. He went to one knee, half whirled around by the deadening shock of the blow and knew that it was the puncher across the street who had shot him. Then more lead snapped past his ears and laid a red hot iron across the top of his shoulder. The other gunmen and the puncher who had been with Holbrook were firing now.

He shot again and saw one of them slam up against the side of the building.

A startled cry burst from the man across the street and behind Phil a six-gun hammered. Head jerked over his shoulder, he saw the puncher who had yelled, go down, coughing. The gunie and the puncher ahead were crouched, weaving as Phil traded lead with them.

Beside him now, twin Colts were hammering, beating a blasting counterpoint to his own hot six-shooter.

He looked, and then forgot to shoot out of sheer shock. For his father was beside him—a father he had never seen or known. A slit-eyed, cold-faced man, fan-

ning double guns as though they had grown in his hands, a born fighting man, swift, deadly, destructive.

Behind Phil, a girl's voice cried a sudden choked warning, "To your right, Phil. That man—" Then a gunshot.

Phil's eyes whipped to the alleyway where a man was still on his feet, firing left-handed, with his smashed right shoulder reddening.

Before Phil could fire, the shot of a light gun, thinner, sharper than the heavy slam of the .45, laid a bright thread of sound across the uproar and the gunie folded at the middle and went down.

Phil looked back over his shoulder and saw Sally Corbin standing there, with a smoking, nickeled .32 in her hand. Behind her was the sheriff.

Phil turned to his father, who had gone to one knee but was now getting painfully to his feet. He could see blood staining one of Ben's thighs and running from higher up also, on the other side.

"You—you're hit," Phil said dazedly. Somehow his mind did not seem to be working very well.

His father smiled calmly. "Nothin' much," he said. "Not as bad as you. Better let me have a look at that side."

But Sally was faster. Her frantic hands were at Phil's flank, feeling the wound. "Phil, darling, is it bad?"

Phil said dazedly, "Why—why hell, it's nothin'. What—what happened? How did Ben get out?"

Ben looked suddenly embarrassed. "Don't worry about that now," he said hastily. "You've got to be patched up."

But Sally cried out, not understanding. "No, tell him! Phil, Ben's innocent. I—I mean we've proved it! One of the other H Bar H hands—Jim Murphy—saw that thing this morning. He couldn't stand for murder, either. He said he would have testified in court. But I made him talk to me. That's what I wanted to tell you, out there on the range."

Phil stared at her, a sudden sickness coming into him. "Then—then there wasn't any need. . . ."

His father cut in, his words quick and disturbed, "You couldn't know that, Phil."

Phil's heavy, wondering gaze went to him. "You—you fought," he said. "I didn't even know you could use a gun."

A SHORT bark of laughter sounded at his elbow. He turned to find the sheriff's gaze fixed on him with something like unbelief in it. "You don't mean that?" the lawman asked.

Phil nodded his head irritably.

The sheriff laughed again. "Why your dad—" he began.

Ben Burchard said, "Leave it," in a quick, impatient tone.

"Leave it?" the lawman echoed indignantly. "Hell, the kid's growed, ain't he? It's time he knew." He swung on Phil. "There wasn't anybody short of Wild Bill Hickok that would have cared to go up against your dad when he was young," he ripped out. "He was chain lightnin', was what he was. Your mother made him give up gun-fightin', promise never to wear a gun again an' never to teach you to use one. She knew, because she was a wise an' great lady. Hell, there hasn't been a day for twenty-five years that he couldn't have had my job an' better. He could have gone high as a lawman, but he passed it up, because your ma didn't want it—because she wanted to live quiet an' at peace on a little spread."

Phil's dazed eyes went to his father. "You—you mean it was her that wanted it this way—wanted to live on a miserable little spread, poor an' workin' herself to death?" The bottom had dropped out of his world and the walls of it were crashing around him.

His father nodded, but it was the sheriff that spoke. "Workin' herself to death? Miserable? Hell, I never saw a happier woman in my life, an' I—well, I

know because I watched. You see, she—she could have been the sheriff's wife any time she wanted to be."

"As though it hurt a woman to do a little work!" Sally Corbin exclaimed softly. "Money an' big houses and softness don't count for anythin'. What a woman that's worth her salt wants is to work for the man she loves!"

Phil looked at her and stammered, color flaring into his drawn face. "You mean you—you mean I—it don't matter to you that. . . ." He broke off, choking.

"Oh, you dear fool," Sally said softly, looking at him with eyes that shone as though sudden lamps had been lit behind them.

And Phil stared back at her for a long moment before he pulled his own glowing eyes away and looked at his father. "I guess I've just been a damn fool, an' not very damn dear either—about everything," he said huskily. "If you could forgive me, Ben. . . ."

Ben Burchard's lean hand reached out and met his own in a hard, fierce clasp. "I wouldn't give a damn for a boy that couldn't be a fool," he said, his voice suddenly ragged.

Without looking at her, Phil put out his other hand and swept Sally up against him. "Anyway, I'll be tryin' to grow up now," he said.

"With help," Sally breathed, blushing and nestling her forehead into the curve of his throat.

THE END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# Tensleep's Tenderfoot Partner

By BART CASSIDY

Yonder comes a blocky, frowning man with a badge on his chest and a gun in his hand. . .

**Two-hundred dollars for a herd of stolen Muleshoe ponies meant grub, liquor and a high time for Tensleep Maxon, horse-loving fugitive. But for the pilgrim who followed him, it meant that Tensleep's neck was already in the noose!**

YONDER grazes the Muleshoe horse herd, an' a sweet bunch of fuzzies they are. Admirin' them ponies in the gatherin' dusk, I give free rein to a touch of bitterness. The Muleshoe has growed big an' strong an' fat over the ashes of a lot of nester hopes. Likely some the brands blotted on them horses belonged to small ranchers who are now dead, or run plumb off the range. An', besides, I've got a quick market for six cowponies, with money on the line when I turn 'em into the corral.

It's a temptation, an' me bein' Tensleep Maxon, a mortal sinner an' weak of the flesh as the sayin' goes, I fall from grace.

Them six ponies just naturally seem to welcome bein' cut out an' hazed away from that domineerin' Muleshoe outfit.

Night is fallin' when the cowboy on the ridge starts poppin' slugs at me with a thirty-thirty saddle gun. He's too far off to do any kind of shootin', so I toss my hand at him, contemptuous, an' smile to myself as night closed down. They'll play hell follerin' me until dawn, an' by that time I'll be. . . .

My first setback comes at the corral, deep hidden in the hills, where I deliver the broncs. I'm met there by a rawboned gent with a glitter in his eye an' a rifle hung across his arm. He opens the gate an' I pen the six ponies. Then he lights a lantern an' looks 'em over.

"Nice bunch of ponies," he says, admirin'. "You know hawss flesh, young feller."

"I'm a hawss pickin' devil," I tell him, modest. "But I don't work for my good health. How's about the two hundred dollars I've got comin'?"

"Oh yeah—" he snuffs the lantern. "Of course I don't pack no such amount around in my levis. I'll ride to Verde Buttes with you an' report to the boss. He—"

"But Faunce Sallee told me he'd have the money here," I protest.

"Don't know nothin' about that," he snaps. "An' I've got no money to pay you. You want I should go in with you, or not?"

THERE'S nothin' else to do. I've got no appetite for hangin' around Verde Buttes after bein' spotted an' shot at by a cowboy of the powerful Muleshoe. So I'm a little bit uneasy as him an' me start for town. An' it don't make me any easier when, after reaching the toe of the hills, we pull our ponies into the brush with a nearing beat of hoofs in our ears. There's a swift rush of horses, an' a cavalcade sweeps past in the starlight, headin' into the hills. The riders are coated against the night chill an' their guns, belted outside, give back whatever light there is. A voice says:

"He was headin' thisaway with 'em, an' there ain't but a place or two he can get through these hills. Come daylight, we'll pick him up sure."

The dust rose to taint the air, then fell away. Sounds of their passing die in the distance. My companion lights a cigarette, snorting: "Let 'em ride. They'll be good if they find that corral. Let's travel."

We come lopin' into Verde Buttes, my friend laughin' when I suggest that we tie our ponies back in the alley. "What you scairt of, feller? Them cowboys ain't comin' here, an' if they did, what would it buy 'em? Don't you know Faunce Sallee runs this town an' the county law as well."

It's a strong augerment, but I'm still worried when we leave our ponies on the street, enter the bar-room of the Auction Saloon an' go right through to a little back room. Sallee is alone when we enter, an' he's all business.

"Hello Turk," he says, crisp. "Hello, Tensleep! Well, how'd you come out?"

"He done all right," puts in Turk. "Six tops are coolin' their heels in the corral, an' the Muleshoe boys are bustin' down brush lookin' for 'em."

They enjoy a good belly laugh together, showin' me that they've got some reason for hating the Muleshoe. Sallee turns to me, his eyes admirin'.

"Good boy," he applauds. "I had my doubts about you, but now I'm satisfied you're the gent I've been waiting for. How'd you like to work for me? Three hundred a month as a guarantee."

I sit down with the two of 'em, while Sallee paints a purty picture of where I'll wind up if I play with him. An' all the while something is trying to warn me to get out of Verde Buttes. So I stall him off, tellin' him I want to take it easy for

a while before takin' on anything else. We part real congenial, him a little impatient that I'm not snappin' up his offer, me with two hundred dollars burnin' a hole in my pocket.

As I walk out into the bar-room to buy a drink, I glance casual at the gents linin' the bar. It's easy to pick out the regular patronage an' the hangers-on. An' them last, about a dozen strong, ain't what you'd call daisies. They're a tough lot. It ain't that, it ain't any one thing that curdles my appetite for the whole business. But when I leave the Auction, I'm definitely headed for far pastures, though with no particular idea of speed until I climb onto Nugget's back. Then, suddenly, speed is all that matters.

As I rein Nugget from the rack, a voice says: "Hey you! Just a minute!"

I whirl in the saddle. Yonder comes a blocky, frowning man with a badge on his chest an' a gun in his hand. As if that ain't enough, behind him a few doors, a group of mounted cowpunchers sit their saddles, watching me intently. Though I can't identify them riders, I'm in no doubt that they're Muleshoe riders, and that one of them has spotted Nugget as the brute that carried the rustler away from the range of his bullets. So I'm in a split stick, faced by the necessity of makin' a quick judgment.

I make it by loosin' a rebel yell an' stabbin' Nugget with the spurs. That golden bronc doubles an' launches himself like an arrow from a bow-string.

The sheriff fires, the bullets screamin' over me as I go down over the horn. The cowboys are in motion; I can hear the rollin' of hoofs behind me. But I cheat the guns I know they're whippin' from their holsters by kneein' Nugget right, puttin' a bunch of racked ponies between us, hurdlin' the walk an' squirtin' back between two buildings. Hitting the dark alley, I turned right again, figurin' them cowboys will be expectin' me to take out in the direction of the hills. It only partly works. When I hit the street again an' pound across the bridge, wild, ribald yells lift behind me, an' lead starts snappin' about my ears.

THE horse ain't been foaled that can spot Nugget that kind of a start an' ketch him. We pour out into the night, the golden hawss doublin' an' reachin', an' me thumbin' my nose at pursuit. But it ain't as easy as all that. I don't know the country an' the gents follerin' me do. Seems like whatever I choose to do, they outguess me. All that night I try desperate to shake them. An' all the next day I'm tryin' vainly to throw 'em off my trail. It ain't till midnight the next night that I'm sure I've lost 'em an' can chance lettin' Nugget graze while I grab a mite of shut-eye. Up on a high, cold mesa, I build a little fire in a little gully, munch a few crackers from my saddle pocket, an' lay down to sleep.

It don't seem more than a minute after I lay down that I open my eyes. A man is lookin' down at me with a funny look on his face. He's thin, sorta stooped, with a gaunt face, sour, down-curvin' lips, an' troubled eyes. He's dressed like a dude an' plainly a little puzzled at findin' me here. At that, he's no more puzzled than I am. For the sun has set an' another night is movin' westward. I've slept the clock around.

"Sorry partner," he says, grinnin'. "Didn't mean to disturb your rest. But if you'll move over, I'll roll in with you."

"The bed's yours," I say, gettin' up, an' takin' a glance at his fine dun hawss. "I could go for a bite of breakfast though."

"Sorry," he says, kickin' a few sticks together an' settin' fire to 'em. "I've got supper in my saddle bag, if you don't mind missin' them two meals."

"Pleased," I grin, an' pick up my saddle to screw it on Nugget's back.

Well his bacon an' bread is a life-saver, but his line of talk makes me sorta skittish. I can't make him out. He's probin' a little, tryin' to learn what I'm doin' here. An' I'm doin' the same. Added together, we talk at cross purposes an' learn exactly nothin'. Night falls an' silence falls between us. He's plainly done up an' about asleep, as he sets with his head restin' on his crossed arms.

I get to my feet, lift my hands in a big stretch. Nothin' to hold me here with this wanderin' pilgrim. . . .

"That's it, brother!" raps a cold voice from the brush. "Hold 'em right up there, unless you want to swallow lead!"

Cripes! I stretch again an' the sleepy dude comes bouncin' to his feet, wide awake now. Out of the night comes that blocky sheriff of Verde Buttes, his gun leveled dangerously. "Watch 'em careful, boys!" he growls, an' comes forward to take away our guns. Then the cowboy posse comes into the firelight, bearded, grimy and hollow-eyed.

"If we had a tree handy," says one, weary, "we'd string up these hawss-thieves an' take a sleep."

"You can take a sleep," snaps the sheriff, "when we get these birds into the jail-house. Come on you two."

"Hold on, Sheriff," I protest. "I'm the gent you've been chasin', not this feller."

"Don't give me that," sneers the lawman. "You boys split up an' played it pretty cute. I lost one of you an' would have been out of luck if I hadn't cut the sign of the other. It led here, an' I bag you both. Now get goin'."

"But, Sheriff—" I protest.

"Don't listen to him, Sheriff," says the dude, comin' suddenly to life. "You've done a good job and I'll plead guilty. I'll confess to hose stealing, even if he don't."

"I quit," I say, stung by the laughter of the cowboys. "Of all the crazy hoot-owls I ever saw—"

I FORK Nugget an', side by side with the nuttiest pilgrim I ever recall meetin', I'm herded down into the valley an' toward Verde Buttes. It's close to midnight when we cross the bridge an' ride into town. But, strangely, the street is seething with excited men. A holler goes up when they see us, an' they swarm around, glarin' at me an' the dude."

"Where'd you nab 'em, Milton?" they say to the sheriff.

"Let us have 'em, Pete. After their cold-blooded murderin', there's no use havin' a trial. Let's hang 'em."

"Hold on here!" Sheriff Pete Milton's voice tumbles through the growin' muttering crowd. "What's all this talk about killin'? These boys are nothin' but a couple of o'nery hawss thieves that taken some of the Muleshoe ponies. I—"

"Like hell!" busts in one of the mob. "I don't doubt they stole ponies an' a lot of other things. But mostly they stood up the Powellton-Verde Buttes stage, killed the shotgun guard dead, an' left ol' Hippy McCloon, the buckskin-popper, for the same."

"What?" yelps the sheriff, an' a wave of angry verification rips from the crowd. "When'd all this happen?"

"Yesterday evenin', where the road dips into Buffalo Gulch. McCloon come alive just once, allowed he'd recognize one of the robbers an' then passed out again before he could name him. Doc says he'll likely get well, but he's still unconscious."

The sheriff swivels in his saddle to look at me an' then at the dude. Cripes! I'd been low enough, just acknowledgin' that at last I was nabbed an' pegged to accept the wages of sin, as the skypilot said. But now they're fixin' to charge me with highway robbery an' murder. If this Hippy McCloon dies, I'm sunk. If he lives, havin' recognized only one of the robbers, his testimony can't help me much. Holy cow!

My curiosity about the dude suddenly answered, I turn to look at him. He's starin' at me, his eyes wide an' his lips curlin' in a hateful sneer. I get an entirely different picture of the man in that moment. Up to now he's seemed soft, helpless an' a dumb skull to boot. But now I suddenly see him as a cold killer, posin' behind a tenderfoot front. His confessin' to a part in that hawss stealin' job just didn't make sense, until now. Who wouldn't take that kind of a rap in preference to bein' charged with murder?

The sheriff hazes us on to the jail, puttin' off the hang lust of certain blood-sweatin' gents by sayin: "Take it easy boys. These fellers are hawss thieves, that I know. I don't know that they was mixed up in the stage job. If they are, we'll learn all about it when Hippy snaps out of it."

He's got a pugnacious way with him an' he makes it stick. He herds us into the sheriff's office an' books us, the dude givin' the name of Bill Smith an' me callin' myself Leppy Jones.

"Smith!" I sneer, as we set down in our cell with the length of a cot between us. "Bill Smith."

"Jones," he snarls back at me. "Leppy Jones sure sounds reasonable."

"As reasonable as you draggin' your carrion across my trail," I snap, sour. "I put in a good word for you, back yonder, a favor you refused in order to clear your skirts of something worse. You could have done something for me, out there in the street, if you'd had a speck of decency in your carcass."

"You've got lots of room to talk about decency, you—you murderer!" he rages.

We both rear up, bristlin'. An' for a minute it seems like we'll pile into one another, tooth an' fang. Then, as sudden as the heat's on me, I'm cool again an' grinnin' at him.

"We just naturally get off on the wrong foot together, don't we? Forget it. No use me an' you punishin' each other, considerin' what we'll both likely get out of this. I'm sorry."

"You ought to be," he says, grudgin'.

"What?" I yelp, sore again. "Say that again an' I'll ram it down your weazer."

HE snorts an' sits down. So do I. It's no use; we can't hit it off. Time drags on. I pull out the makin's an' roll a cigarette. An' that reminds me that the sheriff hasn't searched us. An' me with two hundred dollars in green money in my pocket. Whee-ew! That mazuma would be gone in one gulp if that tin-badge ever laid eyes on it. I pull out the bills an' start foldin' 'em, figgerin to put 'em in the sack with the tobacco. I hear Bill Smith gasp, an' ketch him gogglin' at that money like a lonely cowpunch at a dancehall floozie.

"Currency!" he blats, lungin' toward me an' grabbin' my arm. "Let me see that!" His eyes feast on them bills, then he's turned me loose an' is standin' straight an' tall, glarin' at me with as cold a stare as I've ever seen. "You louzy, killing robber!" he says, too soft.

Then he's swarmin' onto me, like a flock of wildcats. Takin' me completely by surprise, tippin' me off the cot an' pinnin' me to the floor.

Pain runs through me, pain that lights up my mad. This crazy young fool needs a lesson, the question bein' if I can teach him. He's got me by the short hair an' the cell is echoin' to the flat an crushin' collision of his fist against my jaw. Lights flash through my skull, an' I put everything I have into a violent turning effort that tips him off me, then under me. I smash him one solid blow between the eyes an' blood gushes from his nose. But, with a flashing twist of his surprisingly wiry body, he rolls me over an' under. But this time I'm ready for him. I get my knees up under him, lift him, ketch him on my boots an' boost him through the air an' against the bars.

We gain our feet at the same time an' crash together, sluggin'. Smith goes reelin' back, havin' no relish for the short, stiff punches to his belly. He ducks an' comes ripping in, his high overhead swing popping me right in the mouth an' splittin' my lip. Whee-ew! If this keeps up, the floor will soon be too slippery with blood to go on, which won't make me mad. I rush him back to the barred door, pin him there an' punish him with pumping fists. He gets his arms around me but I knock him loose with the first real swing I've connected to his jaw.

He snarls back at me an' launches himself upward, swingin'. I sidestep, measure him careful an' sledge him down again with everything I've got. He rolls over, sucking air through his bruised lips. He shakes his head to clear it, mingled blood an' sweat drippin' off his chin. His muttered: "You win, damn you, just as you've won from me in the past," is sweet music to my ears. I sink down on the cot with a sigh, chewin' the meat of that last nut he cracked.

"What do you mean, feller?" I ask. "When did I ever win anything from you?"

He totters to his feet, sinking down on the couch, grateful. "That money you've got," he mourns. "It's mine. I marked it before I sent it by stage from Powellton to Verde Buttes. When you killed the guard to take that money, Jones, you wiped me out."

"You poor fool," I scold him. "You didn't need to take a beatin' to find out how wrong you are. I haven't seen no stage, killed no guard or wiped you out. What do you mean, marked money?"

HE studies me for quite a while. An' then, as if readin' the truth in my eyes, he starts to talk. "It doesn't make any difference now," he says, hopeless. "I'm licked. This is the third thousand dollar loss I've taken in ninety days. I'm at the end of my resources, and my ranch is forfeit according to my contract of purchase. Beside that, I'll be convicted for horse stealing at least, maybe murder—"

"You've got only your bullheadedness to blame for that," I bust in. "If you'd have backed up my augerment to the sheriff, instead of admittin' to a part in a hawss deal that I handled, lone wolf, you'd have been well out of this."

"I told the truth," he says, miserable. "I did steal a horse, from a hidden corral in the Coyote Hills. My pony was fagged from running; I was in a panic and somehow the sheriff got on my trail."

"The sheriff was after me," I explain, "for putting them ponies in that hidden corral. That's howcome him to cut your sign. What was you runnin' for in the beginning, if it wasn't for killing the guard an' robbin' the stage?"

He looks plumb scairt. "You—you think I robbed the stage?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Good Lord!" he gasps. "It's my money. Why would I try to rob myself?" An' then as if the question takes the wind out of him, he goes sheepish. "The answer to that is plain, and I'll make it. I did try to rob myself! I did stop the stage!"

"It's been a long time comin' out," I say, sarcastic.

"I bought a ranch," he says, plainly eager to unburden. "I paid thirty thousand dollars down and agreed to pay a thousand dollars a month—"

"That's important money, neighbor," I say, skeptical.

"I am Smith Earnshaw," he confesses. "One of the heirs to the fortune of Cotton Earnshaw. I have a trust that pays me a thousand a month. I depended on that to make my payments. But now I've missed three and, according to the terms of the contract, I lose the ranch and all I've put into it."

"Lost three thousand? How?"

"First time, I sent one of my cowboys in with the money. He was found dead, robbed. The second time I brought it in myself. I was attacked right in Verde Buttes, slugged and robbed. This last time, I had it sent in by express. I was cutting across from the ranch to claim the money and make the payment, when I looked down on the road from the mesa and saw four masked men waiting for the stage. I cut back and stopped the stage. The driver and guard wouldn't believe me, wouldn't give me my money. So I got tough and stood them up, like a fool."

"You mean you killed the guard?"

"No, no. I made them throw out the box and then those four highwaymen came at a hard run, shooting. I saw the guard and driver fall, escaped being hit myself and rode free in a rain of bullets. I rode in a panic, knowing I'd played the fool—"

"You sure did, partner," I bust in. "Mebby you're the gent this Hippy McCloon recognized."

"I'm sure of it," he mourns. "I've ridden with him on the box several times and I made no attempt to disguise myself. If he lives, they're sure to pin the robbery on me. In the meantime, Faunce Sallee will have my ranch and—"

"Faunce Sallee?" I yelp. "Is he the one you bought the ranch from?"

"He's the one."

"I see it all," I say, studious. "Sallee never intended that you should make the payments. That's just the kind of a game he likes to play."

"You know him?"

"I ought to," I tell him, grim. "He's the feller I got them marked bills from. An' for Muleshoe hawsses he wanted stole for him an' hidden in that secret corral you spoke of."

"We know it," he says, finally. "But how can we prove it?"

"We gotta get out of here, partner, before they get ropes around our necks."

"If we can," he says, eager, "I'll call that crook, Sallee, to account."

"If we can," I correct him, "you better go on home an' leave the gun-work to your betters. I—"

"Betters," he bristles. "I'll shoot you you for money, marbles or chalk, Jones. And guarantee not to miss a single pip in a playing card spread, at ten paces."

"Long talk, Earnshaw," I grin. "I'll just try you out. Mebby I misjudge you."

THEN, just as mad at Sallee as I'm the one he's injured, I start bangin' on the cell door an' hollerin'. After a while the night deputy comes in from the office, blinkin' an' freshly awakened. All he knows is how to cuss us out until I press one of them marked yellowbacks into his hand. He grins then an' goes out for the food I'm hollerin' for. He's got the tray in one hand an' is turnin' to lock the cell door behind him when me an' the dude hit him. He falls like a wet saddle blanket.

Me an' Earnshaw pop out into the office, find our gunbelts an' pistols in a desk drawer an' buckle 'em on. Earnshaw seems to know his way about, headin' back to the alley an' pausin' at the back door of the Auction Saloon. He's wearin' a fine Smith an' Wesson in a funny, high-hung holster, but he looks grim an' capable as he pauses there to verify the loads in his gun.

"He'll be in there," he says, jerkin' his head to'rds a lighted rear window. "An' we'll pay him a friendly call—"

"Hold on," I husk. "What you figgerin' on doin', once you get inside?"

"Uncover the rest of that marked money," he rasps. "An' make him explain how he comes by it."

He opens the door, plunges into a dimly lighted hall, me hard on his heels. I'm too amazed at the unbelievable saltiness of this dude-like pilgrim to even think about gettin' scairt. The dull mutter of voices strikes through the door, under

which light is striking—a locked door.

"What do you think?" he whispers. "Shall we shoulder it open or had I better rap?"

"Bust in," I tell him, "an' you may run right square into a buzz-saw. On the other hand, if you knock, they won't let you in till they've got the stuff you're lookin' for well hid. Mebby you better give it up, kid. This looks like a case where cunnin' is worth more than strong arm courage."

"Something in what you say," he admits, strokin' his sharp jaw. "But the buzz-saw seems the lesser of two evils."

We back up, ready to take a run at the door. Then we're freezin' as a key rattles in the keyhole an' the door swings open. Sheriff Pete Milton shows there, silhouetted against the light behind him.

His head comes around, an' he spots me an' Earnshaw standin' there. He halts, abrupt, his eyes buggin' with a mixture of fear, anger an' puzzlement. His jaw kinda sags an' he starts retreatin' as Smith Earnshaw walks right at him. I foller along, watchin' Faunce Sallee an' his three mates, who are kicking back their chairs an' rising. When we're inside, I take time to close the door an' turn the key, never taking my eyes from them four starin' gents at the table.

"What's this?" Sallee's voice ain't so hearty.

"Here's the pair that stole the Muleshoe ponies," says the sheriff. "But how in the hell they got out of jail I dunno."

"You're crazy, Pete!" Sallee's tone is suddenly full of unconvincing hooraw. "These boys ain't rustlers. This one is my friend, Smith Earnshaw—boy I sold the Doubletree iron to. An' the other is Pony Jones, a boy that's rode for me occasionally. Nope. Pete, I guess you'll never make much of a sheriff."

He tries to hair it over with joviality, but I notice that he don't unbend, not for one second. An' my tenderfoot side partner don't fall for it, no more than I do.

"Sallee," he says, cutting. "You bluff a good game of poker, but I'm calling your hand. You better be holding the cards."

"Meaning what, Earnshaw?" Sallee's arms angle a bit.

"I'm not here to beg for more time," says the tenderfoot, "or for anything else. I anted thirty thousand dollars in your crooked game, only to have you steal my counters and empty my seat for some new sucker."

"Why you—you insolent pup!" Sallee's face reddens. "You can't come in here an' talk to me like that."

"It's no good, Sallee," says Earnshaw, cold. "You've robbed me twice in order to cheat me of the ranch. You got away with it twice, Sallee, but the third time was the charm. When you paid Jones some of the money I marked in the presence of the express agent, you gave yourself away. You robbed the stage, Sallee, and that is the money, piled there on the table."

SILENCE greets his statement, the sheriff's eyes shuttlin' to Sallee an' that gent playin' over the other three, one of whom is the one I met at the corral—the feller called Turk. They blink, movin' back from the table. Sallee grins, cruel.

"That's killin' talk, Earnshaw, spoke in shootin' lingo."

"Well!" says Earnshaw, an' never have I heard a straighter challenge.

"Get 'em—both!" screams Sallee, an' he's first to his holster.

Bein' thus slated for execution, I really bust out with a draw. But my efforts are pitiful alongside those of the tenderfoot—Smith Earnshaw. Cripes! His gun jumps into his hand an' he's foggin' it. The light dances as he flashes two shots. The glare fades from Sallee's eyes an' he sinks down, his body clumpin' behind

the table. An ugly red hole appears between the eyes of the smooth gambler, who had stood beside Sallee. He drops his rising pistol, clutches at the table edge, then falls as his strength fails.

The sheriff, between me an' Earnshaw, jerks his cutter an' throws it around to down the dude. I stop him with a slug through the guts. A bullet from Turk burns along my neck, chunking into the wall. I hand one back to him, with better aim. He goes down, screaming, his body thudding against the floor.

Gunfire ends an' the light quits jumpin' on its wick. Four men are on the floor, all very dead except the sheriff, who is holdin' his belly an' moanin' as he writhes. The tenderfoot ain't touched, an' me—I'm sound except for a scratch on the neck.

The last of Sallee's pards is backed into a corner, his hands wavin' in the air, his face white an' his lips droolin'.

Earnshaw snears at him. "You treacherous dog!" he says, hateful. "I don't know what God is saving you for. No wonder I've been robbed, when my own foreman is betraying me."

The inner hall is shudderin' to the pound of boots an' someone is beatin' on the door. "Faunce, what's wrong?"

Earnshaw, his face hard as railroad steel, shoves the sheriff with his foot.

"Quit cryin', you!" he snaps. "Holler for them to fetch the express agent."

He emphasizes the order with a flirt of his gun, an' the lawman croaks the words. Presently there is a hammerin' on the door an' Earnshaw nods. I open the door an' the agent comes in, followed by a curious crowd. Earnshaw offers no explanation, just asks the agent to look at the tabled bills, then hands him the receipt from the office in Powellton. The agent's face is grim as he faces the crowd.

"Gentlemen," he says. "This is the loot taken from the stage. Maybe Mister Earnshaw can explain—"

A commotion sets up down the hall an' an excited townsman busts in. "Hippy McCloon just come back to life!" he hollers. "He says the leader of the bank robbers was—" he gulps, reachin' for his breath. An' me an' Earnshaw swap glances, hopeless.

"Says it was who?" hollers somebody.

"Sheriff Pete Milton!"

AN Injun yell is wrung outa me an' thankfulness is painted all over the tenderfoot's face. They put the pressure on Milton then an' he confesses, namin' Sallee, Turk, the gambler an' Earnshaw's foreman. Then, havin' condemned himself, he stabs his finger at me an' Earnshaw.

"I'm done!" he croaks. "A victim of temptation. But don't let these killers go, men. They stole some Muleshoe ponies an' I run 'em down, the last honest job I'll ever do."

Earnshaw laughs. "That's good," he says, convincing. "We stole Muleshoe ponies for Faunce Sallee, in order to trap him. My partner, gentlemen, is the celebrated marshal, Leppy Jones. At my request, he came here to help clear up this stage job. He has another job waiting for him now and, much as we'd like to show our appreciation by entertaining him, we must recognize that others need him as badly as we did." He gives me his hand. "Thank you, Jones. You'll be long remembered in Verde Buttes."

The townsmen crowd around, shaking my hand. Then I'm outside, hittin' a high lope for the jailhouse corral—an' Nugget. I'm chucklin' to myself, recallin' Earnshaw's straight face as he paid me off for my attempt to clear him that night at the campfire by some of the flossiest lyin' I've ever heard.

He'd remember me for many a day, he said. "An' it'll be a long time before I forget my tender-foot gun-mate, who turned out to be tender-tough!

# WHEN NEIGHBORS HUNT A COWMAN

By CLIFF FARRELL

**Neither the hate of his own rancher neighbors nor the deadly blast of sheepers' guns could make young Buck Coldiron forget the first commandment of the frontier: "Once a cowman, forever a cowman!"**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Cowmen, Beware!

THE trap that Buck Coldiron fell into that stormy fall night, had a tempting bait in the form of a dashing, blonde, blue-eyed girl.

Cold, sleety rain, driven by a moaning wind, beat against the chinked walls of his squatty ranchhouse. Beef roundup was over, and his four punchers had gone to Laramie to get rid of their wages. Buck, alone at the ranch, could hear the steady drip from the eaves, and the dismal voice of the gale in the pines outside. His slicker and saddle clothes were drying back of the cookstove in the kitchen. He was sitting before the ruddy fire in the little main room, his lank legs stretched languorously to its warmth, when he heard that alien sound above the wailing of the storm.

He came to his feet, listening, the slackness gone from his saddle-lean body, his dark eyes intent in a rawboned face. He was wondering if that had been only the lament of a cougar. The big cats sometimes sounded like a weeping woman when they gave voice. It came again. And this time there was no mistake.

He jerked open the outer door. The glow of the fire and the table lamp bored into the rainy wall of darkness, revealing

"You fool!" Buck panted, "I was only coming to help you!"

**Vigorous novelette of cowman conflict**

a sobbing girl. She had a slicker wrapped around her shoulders, and hooded over her head. It framed a woebegone face.

"I—I hate to bother you on a night like this, sir," she choked, her teeth chattering. "But my dad's wagon is bogged down on the trail. Could I borrow a horse or a team to help drag us out of the mud?"

BUCK led her to the fire. The slicker fell away, revealing hair that was golden yellow. She wore a blanket mackinaw, and heavy woolen breeches thrust into high-laced boots. She was shapely, and young, and mighty attractive.

"We were on our way to Three Forks," she explained, huddling gratefully by the fire. "But darkness overtook us on the trail. Then we got stuck. We'll be glad to pay for the use of a team."

Buck made her stay by the fire. He took the harness team out of the barn. By lantern light, he located a big, canvas-hooded boomer's wagon, down to its hubs on the trail. A wizened, thin-nosed man with faded eyes was puttering around it, cursing helplessly.

Buck dragged the heavily-laden prairie wagon out of the boghole, and insisted that the travelers camp at his house for the night.

The man gladly accepted. "I'm Harley Teal, from Ioway, mister," he explained. "We sold out the farm back there, aimin' to move to Idaho where we hear there's new land to be had cheap."

BUCK COLDIRON'S ranchhouse, there in Trigger Valley, wasn't lonely or silent that night. Harley Teal had a gossipy tongue, and he kept it busy. But mainly Buck kept watching the trim-waisted, full-lipped girl. Flora Teal didn't have much to say, but she looked at Buck often and smiled.

It wasn't more than an hour before Buck was certain that he had fallen in love with Flora Teal. He kept trying to think of witty, brilliant things to say, but all he could utter was monosyllables. He was wishing that he had shaved a little more carefully that night, and had put on his white shirt instead of the gray flannel one.

After they had turned in, he lay wrapped up in soogans on the kitchen floor, listening to her soft breathing in his bunk bed in the other room. Buck was thinking that Idaho was a hell of a long way from Trigger Valley, Wyoming. She was a sod-buster's daughter, but that didn't make any difference the way he felt now. He wanted to keep her in this range.

In the morning, Flora looked fresh and alluring in a low-necked blouse, and the peg-topped breeches which fitted her to perfection. A night's rest had made her cheeks pink and full and soft.

The rain had ended, and the clouds were breaking up, letting the sun come through. Trigger Valley glistened in the clear morning light. The snow-clad peaks of the Minarets to the west stood out like a crystal bulwark. The lush, rich flats along the creek were dotted with fat, grazing beef.

"Purty country," Harley Teal marveled, staring from a window. "That soil along the crick looks like it's grown wheat an' alfalfa to a fare-you-well."

"This is all cow country," Buck corrected. "There are five outfits, includin' my own in the valley. We work in a pool. Between the five of us, we own all along the stream, from the mountain to where it drops through Long Gorge there to the north. Ownin' the water rights, we control all the graze from the bald hills off to the east, to the rimrock of the Minarets there to the west."

Buck saddled up gentle horses for his guests, and showed them over his range. Harley Teal became more interested, the longer he looked at those rich flats along the stream.

"How much bottom land do you own, Buck?" he asked.

"Four miles on both sides," Buck explained. "I was born in this valley, weaned an' turned out to grass here. The Coldirons helped pioneer this place, but I'm the only one of the breed left."

"Four miles," Teal marveled, and clucked his lips. "I'd give my right leg to sink a plow in that black soil. I could git a crop of winter wheat in yet this year. I've lost my interest in Idaho after seein' this. Maybe you'd like to sell a farmer a dab of that land? About two hundred an' forty acres. I've got ready cash, if the price is right."

Flora turned, her lips parting in an eager smile. She clapped her hands, pleased. "How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I'd love it here."

Buck shook his head reluctantly. "Don't see how I could do it," he muttered. "Us brand owners have an understanding that we won't sell creek frontage, except to each other."

"You mean they don't want farmers in this range," Harley Teal challenged, disappointed.

"It ain't exactly that," Buck said uncomfortably. "It's sheep we got to think about. There's a big woolie outfit, the other side of the Minarets, that's greedy to shove us out of here. It's owned by the four Nichols brothers. They'd like nothin' better than to sheep us out. As long as we control the water frontage they can't do a thing."

"Sheep," Teal snorted. "I hate the smell o' mutton. I'm a farmer not a sheepman. I aim to raise alfalfa, an' wheat an' corn. As a practical stockman you know that a handy hay ranch is a mighty valuable thing to have around."

"It sure would be," Buck agreed. "Feed comes high when you have to freight it a hundred miles from the railroad."

"Then you will sell dad enough land to farm?" Flora spoke up eagerly. She pulled her horse closer, laying a hand on his arm, smiling up at him with big, pleading eyes.

Buck couldn't hold out. He found himself nodding. And Flora, with a little scream of delight, leaned from the saddle, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "That's for being so agreeable, Buck," she told him.

AN UNEASY qualm struck Buck after he had come down to earth a trifle. He wondered what the other ranchers in the pool would think about it. Crusty old Sid Zeigler and seamy Pony Miller would hit the ceiling, he feared. And there was Ruth Webb, his nearest neighbor to the north, who was running her little Leaning Tree spread single-handed since the death of her father. He flinched as he thought of having to face Ruth Webb's searching gray eyes.

But he had given his word. Harley Teal brought a surveyor from town the next morning. They staked out a level stretch of land west of the creek, a mile above Buck's ranchhouse. They arranged the reconveyanee that same afternoon, in Three Forks, for Teal explained that he was in a hurry to break soil.

Buck was secretly wishing that Teal had preferred the east side of the creek, instead of the west. It was to the west, over the Minaret rim, that the big sheep empire owned by the four tough, range-greedy Nichols brothers lay. Those rich benches on the west side of the valley furnished the cowmen with their only source of winter feed. If sheep came in there before snowfall and grazed off those sheltered draws and flats. . . .

Emerging from the recorder's office after the sale of the land, Buck's eyes narrowed as he watched two men who lounged in front of the Pug Nose Bar, across the rutted cowtown street. It wasn't often that any of the Nichols brothers came across the mountain to Three Forks. They had their own stronghold in Shotgun, a sheeptown in their own territory.

Gar Nichols was idly picking his teeth. He was an underslung bull-dog of a man, with stringy roan-colored hair and pale, shrewd eyes set in a brown, fleshy face. Oldest of the four brothers, he was said to be a hard-headed business man, and handy with fists or a gun in a fight. With him stood the youngest of the four brothers. Sul Nichols, who was about Buck's age, stood an inch over six feet, and weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. He was all bone and gristle. In

spite of his size he was light-footed and quick. Men said that Sul Nichols could have been heavyweight champion of the world, had he gone into the ring. Instead, he had become a past master in the art of bar room fighting.

The two Nichols looked at Buck and Harley Teal, and at the blonde, dashing girl. Sul grinned coldly. He and Buck had traded punches more than once as young buttons. They were grown men now, and hadn't clashed for fifteen years, but they remembered that boyhood feud.

Then the two sheepmen mounted flashy, half-thoroughbred saddle horses, and loped out of town, heading for their own range.

An increasing uneasiness filled Buck's mind as he rode back to his ranch, but he felt like a traitor whenever he looked at Flora Teal.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sheep Across the Deadline

BUCK was corraling the horses, and Flora and her father had gone into the house, when a rider came out of the early twilight.

"Howdy, pardner," a musical voice challenged him.

The dark-haired girl who rode up on a shaggy cow pony, had clear gray eyes, and a straight, frank mouth. Wearing a duck saddle jacket, divided denim skirt and spurred half boots, she had a well-worn saddle rope coiled in front of her knee. She wore gauntlets and leather cuffs.

Ruth Webb could rope and tie a calf about as neatly as the average top hand. Her Leaning Tree brand stacked up as prime and clean as any in the pool. She could cook, and she could dance. And she could shoot a gun. Buck had seen her knock over a running coyote at two hundred yards.

She and Buck had grown up together in Trigger Valley. They had ridden range together, fished and hunted deer more times than he could remember. But he had never really looked at her as he would at a woman. Only as a pal. Someone to josh and hooraw around, or to turn to for advice on cooking or fixing up a house.

"Where've you been keeping yourself?" she asked with easy comradeship. "You missed the schoolhouse dance last night."

"Dance?" Buck said vaguely.

At that instant Flora came out of the house. She retreated hastily when she saw that Buck had a feminine visitor. Ruth Webb stared at the blonde girl. Her gray eyes turned swiftly to Buck, and for an instant there was a deep, vast pain there. But Buck didn't see that.

"It's Miss Teal," he explained. "Her an' her Dad are stayin' with me a few days. They're pilgrims from Iowa."

"A rather pretty pilgrim," Ruth Webb commented. "So that's why you forgot the dance last night, Buck."

"I been showin' them around," Buck admitted.

Ruth's cheeks carried more color than usual. There was a glow of impatient anger deep in her eyes. She was carrying a paper bag that contained a cherry pie. It was fresh-baked by her own hands, and she had ridden five miles to deliver it to Buck, because she knew cherry pie was his favorite dessert.

She started to dismount, balancing the bag precariously. Her spur seemed to catch in the rigging. She gave a gasp, and in an apparent effort to avert a fall, she threw away the pie. It struck Buck squarely in the face. It squashed, and the paper bag burst. He was blinded by gooey juice and red cherries. The mangled pie slithered down his white shirt. He was a sight.

"Oh!" Ruth said calmly. "I'm so sorry. Perhaps your taffy-haired visitor will clean you up."

She swung back into the saddle, whirled her horse and spurred away. Buck scraped

crust and cherries off his face and shirt. "Blast her hide," he blazed. "She did that on purpose."

Flora Teal came from the house, her eyes glittering in resentment as she stared after the departing girl. "Your friend wasn't jealous of me, I hope," she said.

"She's a little hell-cat," Buck snorted. "For half a cent I'd round her up, an' rub her face in the mud. I'd—"

He turned. Three more riders were loping out of the dusk. Buck stiffened. There was old Sig Zeigler in his beaded Indian vest. He was a grizzled beanpole, with a gray-stubbled chin. With him was Pony Miller who had a drooping longhorn mustache. The third man was Jeb Dexter, lean, hard-bitten, who owned the last spread at the north end of the valley.

They dismounted without invitation. Sid Zeigler looked at Buck with keen eyes, and turned to appraise Flora Teal. With a mumbled excuse, she hurried back to the house.

"The county clerk rode out to the place this afternoon, tellin' me some wild yarn about you sellin' crick frontage to a stranger, Buck," the old rancher said, clearing his throat. "Me'n Pony an' Jeb figgered we'd better ask you about it."

"Yeah," Buck said. "I thought a hay ranch in the valley would be an asset. I've sold a few acres to Harley Teal, a pilgrim from Iowa."

There was a moment of tense silence. "If you was in need of cash you could have come to us, Buck," Sid remarked.

"It wasn't that," Buck returned, beginning to steam up. "Why are you lookin' at me like that? There's no harm in havin' one settler in the valley."

"It was sort of understood that nobody would sell water frontage unless all the others, includin' Ruthie Webb had first refusal," Sid snapped. "Who is this man, Harley Teal?"

"I told you he was a settler from Iowa. He had sold his farm back there."

"If this pilgrim was to sell out to the Nichols brothers, you know where we'd be," old Pony Miller grated. "Busted. They'd sheep us out in a hurry."

"Teal's an honest man," Buck said doggedly.

He could see that they were worried and enraged as they rode away. In his heart he couldn't blame them. In the early days they had fought off sheep, and only by frugality and hard work had they been able to buy up or pre-empt all the land along the creek, to insure their grip on the valley. Once they controlled the water with their thin chain of land ownership, the pressure from sheep interests ended. Controlling the creek, the cattle pool also controlled the adjoining benches and back range which was public domain.

Now, because Buck Coldiron had fallen under the spell of a dazzling pair of blue eyes, there was a weak link in the chain.

BUCK didn't sleep any too well that night. He kept trying to convince himself that everything was all right. But in the morning, he had a feeling that Flora's smile had chilled considerably. And for the first time he noticed that she used considerable paint and powder to enhance her flashy beauty.

Harley Teal also was in a sudden rush to break away from Buck's hospitality. "We'll camp on my land," he said. "I'm in a lather to begin breakin' sod."

Teal drove away in the wagon with his daughter, refusing Buck's offer to help. And the girl even forgot to look back and wave goodbye to Buck as they headed up the creek.

Buck had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He puttered around the ranch most of the day, but he couldn't get his mind off of Flora Teal. Her allure had acted on him like a drug. His infatuation was the sudden, unreasoning emotion of a man who had not given much serious thought in the past to the opposite sex.

He saddled up in the afternoon and rode up the creek, hoping to talk to Flora. The big covered wagon was sitting out in the land that he had sold to Teal, with the horses picketed on the graze nearby. But there was no sign of Teal or his daughter, or any evidence that Teal had started laying out a farm.

Buck was frowning as he rode back to his ranch at dusk. As he swung down at the corral, he heard a rider coming at a fast clip. It was Ruth Webb. She pulled up on a lathered horse.

"Buck," she said sharply. "You'd better race over to Sid Zeigler's Place—pronto."

"What's up?" he asked.

Her answer came after a moment's pause.

"The Nichols brothers are shoving a big bunch of sheep through Bucktail Pass tonight," she said slowly. "This man you know as Harley Teal, sold that creek frontage to the sheepmen this afternoon. It belongs to the Nichols brothers now."

Buck stared at the trim, tanned girl. He uttered a bitter groan of despair. "Played for a sucker," he burst out.

Ruth Webb offered no word of sympathy or condemnation. "Pile your top horse, Buck," she urged again. "The boys are talking wild. It's war. They aim to stop the sheep as they come out of the pass. They know they're beaten legally, but they figure to trade some lead with the sheepmen anyway. They'll need every fighting man."

Buck caught up the fastest horse in his string. He accepted the six-shooter and rifle that Ruth brought from the house. "God!" he said miserably. "An' it was me that sold you an' the rest of the outfits out to sheepmen. I fell for a pretty face, like a baby for a stick of candy."

"You're not the first man that's been taken in by a blonde cutie," Ruth shrugged. "Don't be reckless, because you blame yourself. Stopping a sheepman's bullet won't do any good now. If you have to fight, be careful."

There was a catch in Ruth's voice, and tears in her eyes, as Buck sped away. She caught up a fresh horse from his remuda, and followed him five minutes later.

Self-reproach overwhelmed Buck as he headed for Sid Zeigler's Twenty Bar ranchhouse. Like a man emerging from a daze, he saw how easily he had been taken in. The stage-setting had been perfect. A stormy night, a flashy girl in distress, and a lonely and unsuspicious young cowman.

Buck hated to think of facing his neighboring ranchers. They didn't have a chance of beating off this sheep invasion. The Nichols brothers had legal access to the creek now. The valley would be sheeped out relentlessly. Woolies would descend on the west benches like grasshoppers, leaving nothing for the more choosey horned stock. Cattle could not exist alongside sheep.

MEN were grouped in Sid Zeigler's ranchyard as Buck rode up, talking with loud desperation. A dead silence fell as they identified him. Sid Zeigler towered among them. Pony Miller and Jeb Dexter were there, and eight or ten punchers from the various outfits. All had rifles jutting from their saddles.

Buck slid to the ground. "Count me in," he said grimly.

Jeb Dexter uttered a snort of rage. "So you kin sell us out to the sheepers again?" he jeered.

"I'll take that from you, Jeb," Buck said tonelessly. "Because I've got it coming, I reckon, an' because you an' me was always good friends."

"We ain't friends no longer," the hot-tempered rancher shouted. "Go back to your sheep-walkin' pals. You don't belong here, an' ain't wanted."

Old Pony Miller, who had been an Indian fighter in his younger days, stepped

forward. "He ain't goin' back to his pals tonight," he said ominously. "No tellin' how long he's been standin' out there listenin' to us. I'd hate to walk into an ambush up there on the mountain."

And Pony Miller jammed a six-shooter into Buck's stomach. "We'd better tie him up an' leave him here," he added.

There was a rumble of assent. Buck was white-lipped "You don't really think I'd do a thing like that?" he breathed, aghast.

"We ain't takin' any chances," Jeb Dexter snapped. "Maybe you didn't know that little blonde susie was really Dude Nichols' girl. Or that this Harley Teal wasn't her father at all, but only a ham actor the Nichols brothers picked up to help run a blaze on you. Then ag'in maybe you knew all about it from taw, an' was workin' hand in glove with the sheepers to run us out'n the valley."

"I won't take that, even from you, Jeb," Buck exploded, and sent a fist crashing into the cowman's face.

An avalanche of men descended on Buck then. He fought back, but it was mainly to protect himself, for he was appalled by the knowledge that these men were the ones he regarded as his best friends.

They overpowered him, and tied him hand and foot. Sid Zeigler glared down at him. "We're doin' this to make damned sure you don't go runnin' back to that girl, warnin' her that we're on our way to blast some of them sheepers to kingdom come. Killin' off a few of the Nichols brothers is about the only satisfaction we'll ever git out of this rotten deal you handed us, Coldiron. Our ranches are as good as gone. We'll be sheeped out of this valley by spring."

The gaunt cowman turned away. "Let's roll, boys," he said.

They dragged Buck into the shadow of the bunkhouse, piled their horses, and thundered away toward the mountains.

The disgrace of it lay on Buck with damning weight. He held no rancor toward the ranchers for their actions. He accepted full blame, and lay there torn by black self-reproach and regret.

He heard the faint hoofbeats of a lone rider somewhere out in the brush. The sounds receded. It suddenly occurred to him that the sheepmen might have had a spy hunkered out there, listening to the angry war council the cattlemen had held. If so, the chances were that the ranchers would find themselves in an ambush on the mountain.

Buck began to fight his bonds frenziedly. But they had been tied by expert hands. After an age, a rider loomed out of the darkness. It was Ruth Webb. She dismounted with a gasp.

"What happened?" she breathed. "Why are you—?"

"They tied me up, fearin' I'd betray them," he said bitterly. "Cut me loose, Ruth. I got a hunch they're heading into trouble. I heard someone ride away after they had pulled out. It might have been a Nichols man, listenin' in on their plans."

She ran to the ranchhouse, brought a knife and freed him. "They said she was Dude Nichols' woman," he spoke tonelessly, as he came to his feet. "I was played for a fool all right."

"Don't let this poison your mind," she protested. "All women aren't cheats, Buck. Nor all men. You've always have been a fool where women were concerned. You set them on a pedestal, and think there's nothing but good in them.

"I've learned my lesson," he said bitterly, as he swung into the saddle, and touched his horse with steel.

He sped across Trigger Creek, and up the rising benches. The night was clear, and the luminous glow of a rising moon etched out the wall of mountains, and showed the notch that was Bucktail Pass. The moon had cleared the timbered hills to the east, when he eased down his horse

to listen. A mile ahead, he could see the needle buttes, guarding the shallow draw that came down from the high pass. The soft night wind brought a faint, distant murmur. Sheep! He stirred his horse, and rode ahead again.

Then gunfire broke the silence of the mountain bench, far ahead. He could see the flash of guns, tiny and distant, and hear the faint reports. He spurred faster, but after a minute or two he pulled to a stop again.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Outcast Cowman

RIDERS were coming down the bench toward him at a wild gallop. The shooting had ceased. The horsemen came nearer, and in the moonlight he made out Sid Zeigler's tall form in the lead. Sid was clutching a bullet-broken arm. A wounded puncher from Ruth Webb's ranch was sagging in the arms of a comrade who rode double behind him.

Buck stared at two riderless horses which clattered along with the cursing, wild-eyed men. He rode up to them, shouting his name. Sid Zeigler's head lifted, and Buck saw the insane fury in the old man's eyes.

"So that's how the trap was set," Sid screeched. And he jerked a gun and fired at Buck. His sudden motion spooked his horse, and the animal reared as he tripped the trigger. That saved Buck's life. The bullet went wide.

Before Zeigler could steady himself for another shot, Buck had crowded his horse alongside, and knocked the gun aside. "You fool," he panted. "I was only coming to help you. What happened back there? Where's Pony Miller?"

It was Jeb Dexter who answered that. "Back there," he snarled. "Dead! Killed by them damned sheepmen. An' Swede Johnson from Ruth Webb's crew went under too. We run into an ambush. Somebody tipped the Nichols brothers that we was comin'. They shot hell out'n us. I reckon we didn't tie you up tight enough, Coldiron."

Buck stared at them, stunned. "You don't really think I warned them, do you?" he breathed.

They were fanning out to surround him. He saw the unreasoning glare in their eyes. Recognizing his danger, he whirled his horse away. It was death to stand there. They were in no mood to listen to explanations. They had walked into a trap, seen their comrades go down under the fire of hidden guns, and they believed Buck was responsible.

"Shoot down the damned traitor," Sid Zeigler bellowed.

They opened up on him, but Buck's horse carried him into the gloom of timber, before they could bracket him with their lead. They came racing in pursuit, but in the gloom of the trees, they lost him. Buck veered away, outdistanced them. After a time, he reached a canyon higher up the mountain. He was safe now.

Safe! Safe from his own friends. Safe from the men he had grown up with, and who had suddenly turned on him like avenging demons, believing that he had betrayed some of them to their doom.

Buck's eyes were dull with bitter remorse. He hated himself, and held no one to blame but himself. He had brought this disaster on Trigger Valley.

He thought it over as he gave his horse a rest. The Nichols brothers owned the land that he had sold to Harley Teal. There was no legal way of forcing them to give it up. But there might be other methods. Buck recalled what he knew about the four brothers. He was remembering their arrogance, their conceited ways, and their fighting reputations of which they were so proud.

There was only one way to regain possession of that strip of creek frontage

that was being used as a noose to strangle the entire cow range below. The Nichols brothers must sell it back. He saw clearly that to make them sell, he must shatter their pride, destroy their reputations as fighting men, break them to his will.

It was a big order. Buck rolled a cigarette as he thought it over. The flare of the match showed a queer, harsh smile on his mouth. "I'll break them," he said aloud. "One by one. I'll break them or they'll break me."

SHEEP came rolling over Bucktail Pass in gray hordes, beating a trail to Trigger Creek, through the strip that Buck Coldiron had sold. They watered there, and were then turned out to graze on the benches. The cowmen watched the flocks creep into their winter grazing reserve, and they began making plans for moving out of the range, abandoning it to sheep.

In Shotgun, the sheeptown on the west flank of the Minarets, the Nichols brothers were celebrating their victory. A week had gone by since that ambush in the moonlight, and the Trigger Valley cattlemen had plainly learned their lesson.

Sul Nichols bought drinks for the house in the Rams Horn Bar, which was crowded with leathery-faced herders, shearers and pasture bosses. Big, lithely-built, with wide fists Sul had his pearl-gray range hat hung carelessly on his mop of rust-red hair.

"They're yells from brisket to backbone," Sul repeated, pounding the bar. "Cowmen! Bah. They folded up like wet rags when the showdown come."

Two more of the brothers were present in the honkytonk. Dude Nichols, the handsome, natty member of the sheep-ranching family, sat at a table, his arm around the waist of a flashy, blonde entertainer. The girl was Flora Teal, though that was only one of the names she had used in a checkered career, in cow and sheep-town honkytonks throughout the West. Dude Nichols was said to be a knife man, preferring cold steel to bullets or fists in a fight. Conceited and vain, he always dressed in expensive saddle clothes, and strutted for the benefit of the opposite sex.

Playing poker at another table was Lute Nichols, thin-nosed, slit-eyed, and wearing rough, saddle garb. Lute Nichols had a cedar-handled six-shooter hung on his thigh. He had killed three or four men in gun duels in the past. He was a saturnine, cold-tempered man, dangerous to cross.

Only Gar Nichols, the brawny elder of the family, was absent.

At the bar, big Sul was enlarging on his sneering opinion of cattlemen. Whiskey always made him ugly-tempered, and he was spoiling for a fight. He loved to maul a man to a pulp with his fists. He enjoyed his reputation as a bruiser.

"I'd as soon shoot a cowman as I would a coyote," he was declaring. "They're all same in the long run, an'—"

He became aware of a sudden silence. Turning, he found a lean, wiry six-foot man, moving to the bar at his elbow. It was Buck Coldiron. Buck was cleanly shaven, and wore a fresh, white cotton shirt. He was not packing a gun.

"Kinda taking in a sweep of territory, ain' you, Sul?" he asked. There was a thin, hard smile on Buck's straight lips.

Sul shoved a whiskey bottle away, and greedy anticipation showed in his tawny eyes. "Damned if it ain't our heart-bustin' heel-dawg from Trigger Valley," he guffawed. "You sure did us a good turn, Coldiron, when you fell so damned hard for Dude's gal. We all owe you somethin'."

Buck's icy smile remained fixed. "I figure you boys will be wantin' to sell that water frontage back to me before long, Sul," he said. "What do you think?"

"Sell?" Sul uttered a chuckle of derision. "Not 'til they turn hell into a church, feller."

"Suppose you an' me go into the back

room and talk it over?" Buck proposed tersely.

Sul's grin faded. He looked at Buck closely. *"Talk* it over?" he questioned, significantly.

"Or maybe see who's the better man," Buck added. "You an' me had trouble as buttons, Sul. We never found out which one of us was tops. How about settlin' the question now?"

Dead silence had fallen over the honky-tonk. Flora Teal was staring, a scornful smile on her lips, but Buck never even glanced at her. Sul was blinking a little. He took another look at Buck. They were of the same height, but Sul was twenty pounds heavier, and he had wide experience as a rough and tumble fighter. His eyes lighted.

"Come on, feller," he snarled. "I'm goin' to enjoy this."

Sul tossed his gunbelt on the bar, and led the way into a private poker room at the rear. Buck bolted the door behind him as he stepped in. There were two windows, but no other door.

"You're goin' to take a man's-size mauling, Coldiron," Sul promised. "This is to a finish."

"To a finish, Sul," Buck agreed. "I'm going to put the fear of God in you. This will be only the first lesson. Some day, you and your brothers will be damned glad to sell that Trigger Creek frontage back to cow people, at their own price."

THEY circled each other warily for a moment. This grudge dated back to days when they were striplings, when Sul had tried to ingratiate himself with the gray-eyed, slim-legged Ruth Webb, only to have her spurn him and seek Buck Coldiron's company. Sul had never given up hope of winning Ruth Webb. He believed Buck was the man who stood in his way.

Sul closed in with lightning speed, feinting with a left, weaving low and smashing for the solar plexus with a right. Buck rolled aside, the punch doing no damage. He snapped Sul's head back with a right cross that sent the bigger man back on his heels. Sul retreated until he had shaken the cobwebs from his brain.

He came in, leaping, and aiming a boot at Buck's body. Buck caught his leg, upending him with a crash that caused the listening crowd outside the door to wince and stare at each other.

Sul rolled, snatched up a chair, and rushed in, panting. Buck could not entirely evade the chair. It glanced from his head, and he reeled back into a corner, his head spinning dizzily. He dove at Sul's legs, bringing the big man down, but he took fearful punishment as they rolled over and over on the floor. They crashed into the poker table, upending and crushing it, and fought fiercely amid its ruins.

Buck tore away from Sul's thick fingers which were seeking a gouging grip on his face. He came to his knees, and drove four punches into the man's face. Sul's broad features became a bloody, bruised shambles under that trip-hammer attack.

They staggered to their feet. Buck took a blow to the mouth, and caught Sul with a body punch that brought a wheeze of agony. Sul began to bend. Buck straightened him with a punch. Then he knocked him cold with two more blows.

Sul Nichols fell forward on his face, tried to rise, but slumped down, limp and unconscious.

Buck's shirt was in ribbons, and he was weak and giddy. Hands began to pound the door. "Sul!" That was the voice of the gun-fighting Lute Nichols.

Buck smashed the glass from a rear window with a chair leg, and crawled through. He knew that Lute would shoot him down if he attempted to walk out by way of the door. The fighting reputation of the Nichols brothers was at stake now.

Buck had left his horse at the rear of the honkytonk, in anticipation of just such

a hasty departure. As he ran unsteadily toward it, he discovered another rider standing ready.

A firm little hand helped him into the saddle. He found himself looking into Ruth Webb's face. She wore male garb, and a man's hat.

"Ride!" she panted. "They're running out to head you off."

SHE used a quirt on the horses. Together, they sped through the shabby back areas of the sheep town, and into the darkness of the mountainside. Shouts arose behind them, but faded away as they built up distance.

"I located your camp in that canyon we found, when we were kids fishing for trout," she explained. "I followed you this afternoon when you headed for the sheeptown. What are you trying to do, Buck, get yourself killed?"

Buck grinned crookedly from a bruised face. "Just a little pressure to make the Nichols brothers see things my way. That's only the first move in this game of checkers."

She forced him to stop at a stream where she bathed his bruised face with her hankerchief.

He rode with her until she was safely over the rim and within striking distance of her own ranch. Then he pulled up.

"Thanks, Ruth," he said slowly. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. I'm hoping to right one of them now."

There was a sob in her voice. "You can't do this alone," she protested. "It's hopeless. You'll never break them. They're too many for you, too tough and dangerous."

"I'm goin' through with it," he said grimly. "Until they stop me at least. I owe that much to you an' the other ranchers that I betrayed."

He turned and left her there, a forlorn figure, while he turned his horse and headed back to sheep country.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Breaker of Men

THE story of Sul Nichols' defeat in that locked room was still being whispered around the range, whenever none of the brothers were within hearing.

Three nights later, the prestige of the Nichols brothers received another terrific jolt. It was after dark when a fast-moving rider, carrying a limp form over his arm, swept into Shotgun. He came spurring down the street, forced his animal on the plank platform in front of the Rams Horn. And into the gaudy door of the honkytonk, he tossed his prisoner.

The victim was the fastidious, handsome, Dude Nichols. The Beau Brummel of the range was now a ludicrous-looking object. He had been stripped of his fine linen and whipcord, and coated with axle grease and chicken feathers. He had been given a fancy haircut with a pair of sheep shears. All that was left, was a little black topknot of sleek hair.

Dude Nichols crouched there while startled faces stared at him in the honkytonk. He was screaming with rage and humiliation. "It was that damned devil, Buck Coldiron," he frothed. "He roped me on the trail, an' did this to me."

Bystanders didn't dare laugh as they looked at the man who had been the range dandy. It was death to show amusement, for Lute Nichols was present. Lute's face was livid with fury. He had always been contemptuous of his vainglorious brother. He shoved the grease-smeared Dude out of the honkytonk.

"Git out sight," he snarled. "Why did you have to come to town so everybody could take a look at you? You've made a laughin' stock out'n all of us."

Lute Nichols went back into the honkytonk. "I'm killin' the first man that mentions this," he said coldly. "An' I'm shootin' Buck Coldiron on sight."

"No yuh don't, Lute," growled Sul, who was present, wearing the bruises of his encounter with Buck. "I deserve another chance at that bucko."

Big Sul got his chance sooner than he expected. He was riding back toward the sheep ranch at midnight that same night, accompanied by one of the pasture bosses, when a shadowy figure rose up from a boulder in the faint moonlight.

It was Buck, with a gun in his fist. "Lift 'em, Sul," he commanded. "An' you too, sheeper."

He disarmed them, and tied the pasture boss to a tree. The bound man was a witness to what followed. Buck gave big Sul a chance to put up his fists once more. And there in the moonlight, he took Sul to a second, merciless trimming. Sul Nichols was a broken, frightened man before that fight was finished. He was whimpering for mercy, seeking to crawl away.

"How do you feel about sellin' that valley land back to cow people, Sul?" Buck kept asking as he battered him.

"Anything," the dazed, beaten man mumbled. "Only don't hit me ag'in."

The pasture boss was a witness, and he couldn't keep the secret. The word got around that Sul Nichols had eaten crow when put to the test.

Sul didn't have the courage to show his face in Shotgun after that. And Dude Nichols, spurned by Flora Teal, and knowing that the whole range was laughing at him behind his back, could not face it out either. He pulled out for Cheyenne, where he began drinking harder, to drown the memory of his humiliation.

Lute Nichols, and the elder brother, Gar, were awake to what was in the wind now. Gar Nichols, big, heavy-joweled, with brawny shoulders and a thick powerful body, cursed like a madman.

"We got to stop this night riding devil, Lute," he raged, pacing the room at their sheep ranch. "He's out to break our nerve. No tellin' what he'll pull next. Lay for him. Rimrock the country until you get him under your gun sights. Then let him have it an' leave him for the buzzards."

Lute Nichols patted his gun. "I'll take care o' him," he promised, with a sneer at big Sul, who sat dispiritedly in the room. "Now that Sul an' Dude have got their tails between their legs it's time for the men to take hold."

The thin-eyed Lute saddled up, and pulled out for the Minarets within an hour, taking with him a dark-skinned half-breed trailer who knew every game path in the mountains.

AS LUTE and his half-breed companion rode away from the sheep ranch, a watching man in the timber, two miles up the benches, put a pair of battered field glasses back into the saddle pocket of his horse, and withdrew into deeper cover. Buck Coldiron had been watching the sheep ranch every day from that vantage point, and had kept track of the movements of the four brothers.

He knew Lute was on his trail now, and he knew that if they met, the story would be written in gunsmoke and hot lead.

Buck sight-trailed the pair of riders for an hour, keeping to cover, scanning the country ahead. And at last he found the setting he wanted for his next move.

A small stream curved through a grassy boulder-strewn flat ahead. There was a ten-foot cutbank at one point. Below the bank was a stretch of dry sand along the margin of the stream. It was an ideal camp site, partly masked by the cutbank on one side, and willows on the opposite margin of the stream.

Lute Nichols and the breed had vanished into cover of lodgepole pines on a high hogback ridge which commanded a full view of the flat from a mile's distance. Buck rode out into the open flat, crossing it toward the stream. He did not even glance toward the hogback to the north,

though he kept turning in the saddle looking over his backtrail like a man afraid of pursuit.

Buck dropped into the creek bed, and pulled up below the cutbank. The highest point of the distant hogback jutted up so that it overlooked this hide-out. Buck caught the flash of field glasses in the sun, and knew they were watching him.

He went through all the motions of a man throwing off for an hour's rest in this shelter. He picketed his horse and stretched out on the said.

He lay there, giving them time to leave the ridge and begin stalking him. Then he arose, climbed the cutbank, and pulled himself cautiously over the top into the shelter of a boulder, just over the rim.

He lay there motionless in the grass. Long minutes passed. Then he heard the faint rustling of grass nearby. He flattened lower. The sounds advanced to his left. Presently Lute Nichols appeared, ten yards away. Lying on his stomach, Lute was working his way forward, like an Indian, toward the rim of the cutbank. He had a cocked six-shooter in his fist.

Lute was so sure his quarry lay dozing there, on the sandbar below the cutbank, that he never even glanced around.

Buck lifted his head. "Howdy, Lute," he said with cold irony.

Lute's face jerked around, and the shock of his mistake was there in his sharp, pale eyes. Lute had set a trap, and had fallen into one instead.

But he was quick, and desperately fast. He threw his body around, so that he was facing Buck. His gun gushed flame. And Buck was triggering at the same time.

Lying flat as they were, facing each other in the deep grass, they had little targets to shoot at. Buck felt one of Lute's slugs nick the muscles of his shoulder. His own slugs missed three times. But the fourth one was true.

He saw Lute's head jerk back queerly, and he had a glimpse of the bullet hole that appeared between the man's eyes. Lute Nichols' body contorted in agony, then straightened out. He was dead!

It was long seconds before Buck stilled his own jangling nerves. He rose cautiously to his knees, peering over the boulder. He glimpsed the half-breed darting away across the flat, from rock to rock, heading for the pine-clad ridge where they had left their horses. Buck did not fire. The man had been near enough to witness Lute's death. He would carry the story back to the sheep ranch.

Buck arose and stood over Lute's body. "They say that Gar is the toughest of all," he muttered. "We'll see. . . ."

He mounted and rode away along the benches, veering late in the afternoon up a dark, brushy canyon. Mounting higher, he rode into a little, hidden swale, masked by brush and granite ledges. Here was the rude camp where he had slept and eaten for the past ten days.

RUTH WEBB stepped out of the trees as he dismounted. She had been bringing food to this hidden camp at intervals. She looked at the red-stained bandage he had wrapped around his arm.

"You've—you've not met Lute Nichols?" she asked anxiously, for she knew the plan he was following relentlessly.

"Yeah," he said tersely, and gave no other explanation.

She turned and beckoned. Two more figures emerged from cover. They were Sid Zeigler and Jeb Dexter. Their manner was hesitant as they came up, for they were remembering how they had sent hot lead speeding after Buck.

Sid Zeigler coughed uncertainly. "Ruthie brought us here, Buck," he said. "We figgered it was time we apologized to you fer what happened that night after the fight at the buttes. We know now that you had nothin' to do with that ambush. Likely, there was a spy listenin' to our

*(Continued on page 121)*

# IN THE SADDLE

MOST likely you've never seen the little cattle and mining town of Last Chance, but if you had, you'd remember the tall, grizzled gambler called Square Jack Scarlett. He, like the town he bossed, probably never existed under that name, but he was typical of the straight-dealing gambling man of an era that's gone—a time when a man's given word was better than any bond, and life was lived swiftly and dangerously to the accompaniment of blasting six-shooters.

Perhaps Jack Scarlett was no angel, but few of those who lived along the roaring frontier were. He carried a derringer up his sleeve; he ran a gambling house; he was ruthless toward his enemies, which were many, and would go to hell and back for his friends, which could be counted on the fingers of one hand. He lived by his code—which might be summed up in three simple precepts: Play the game square, play out your hand without whining, and stick to your friends.

Walt Coburn, who knows his old West as few men do, sent in the unforgettable story of Jack Scarlett—a dramatic saga of the boom-town frontier and of the full-blooded, courageous men and women who helped to build it.

One event, slight in itself but deadly in its significance, set Jack Scarlett on his last perilous trail of conflict and high drama. For Tobe Coulter was a bad loser on the night he gambled away to Jack five hundred head of steers which Tobe had no right to lose. He drew his gun just as his two tough brothers barged through the swinging doors of the Square Deal, and that was the last mistake Tobe ever made. Jack Scarlett, wounded and with his back to the wall, beat off the Coulters and their hard-bitten gun-hands, and when the powdersmoke cleared away, Tobe Coulter's bullet-riddled body was stretched on the floor of the gambling house.

Later, when the Coulters came back to town to collect Tobe's body, they protested that Tobe had gambled away their own cattle without their consent. It was typical of Jack Scarlett then that he refused to give up the dead man until he collected the cattle he'd fairly won.

"Even the devil in hell hates a welsher, Coulter," Jack Scarlett's flat-toned voice came from his thin lips. "The game was on the square. You got my proposition. Take it or leave it."

There was a tense silence, then Clabe Coulter relaxed in his saddle. "You'll get your cattle, gambler. Tobe was my brother, an' all I kin do now is to give him proper buryin'. When the sign is right, I'll pick up the hand he dropped. I didn't know that humans come as cold-blooded as you, mister. Some day you're goin' to be reminded about this, and then you'll know why you'll be gettin' no mercy. That five hundred head of cattle is goin' to cost you everything you'e got on this earth, tinhorn. There ain't no man can take his revenge out on a dead man an' stay lucky!"

Then Clabe Coulter turned and rode back to his ranch as Square Jack Scarlett stared after him.

That set the stage for one of the tensest stories of man-conflict, of flashing drama, of laughter, tenderness and tragedy that we've come across in a long time. In it the man called Jack Scarlett comes to life as a great, tragic and yet loveable figure. Walt Coburn's called the story of this gambler's last hand "The Square Dealer of Last Chance," and we think it fits the novel.

It, and other yarns of the frontier, by Olmsted, Farrell, Cassidy, Pearsol and other writing gents who know and love the old West, will appear in the April issue, published March 1st!

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pow-wow, who set that trap for us. Ruthie told us how she cut you free."

Buck extended his hand to them. "But it was me that let the sheep come in in the first place," he reminded them grimly.

"A man makes mistakes," Jeb Dexter demurred. "Now that we've had time to cool down a little, we ain't holdin' that in our craws any longer, Buck. Fightin' the Nichols brothers single-handed ain't a coward's chore. Every cowman has heard what you did to big Sul, an' to his fancy brother. An' now, Lute?"

There was a grim question in Jeb's eyes. Buck said slowly, "Gar Nichols is the only one left for me to work on now."

"I don't savvy your plan," Jeb admitted. "I admire your courage, Buck, but I don't see any point to it. You're makin' an outlaw of yourself."

"I've only fought in self-defense this far," Buck denied. "Except maybe when I greased and feathered Dude. At that, he flashed a knife on me. But I kicked it out of his hand. It's this way, Sid. I aim to convince the Nichols brothers that they'll live longer, an' a lot more peaceful if they sell that water frontage on Trigger Creek back to cow folks. I've already convinced Sul that it's better to drop Trigger Valley like a hot potato. Dude has quit the country, an' I reckon he won't stand in the way if the others decide to sell. Lute is dead. There's only Gar to win over to my point of view."

"Gar's the toughest of the lot," Sid Zeigler warned. "Fight him with guns if you fight him at all."

"We ain't lettin' you tackle him alone," Jeb Dexter growled.

Buck shook his head. "I started this, Jeb. I aim to finish it alone. I'm riding over to the sheep ranch after dark. Maybe I'll get a chance to talk to Gar, an' see if he's as tough as he's labelled."

They argued, but Buck stood steadfast

*(Continued on page 122)*


# *"They kept me twice and let others go..."*

**"... principally because I was a LaSalle-trained man. My salary has more than doubled and I expect to go right on from here." So says one recent letter in our file that is typical of many.**

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*(Continued from page 121)*

against any offer of help from them. "You're both married men," he said. "When I tackle Gar there's likely to be trouble. Maybe the law will have to take a hand. Keep clear of this, all of you. I won't stand for any interference."

They mounted reluctantly, and pulled out. But Ruth Webb didn't go with them.

"I'm not leaving you," she told him positively. "You're a stubborn fool for not letting them help. I suppose you think your pride is worth more than your life. Gar Nichols isn't dumb. He must know that he's next on your list. He'll be ready for you."

"I don't figure Gar will expect me so soon, after what happened to Lute this afternoon," Buck said. "You won't be needed there tonight."

He framed more arguments, but the words died on his lips as he saw the soft brightness in her eyes. He gave a gesture of futility.

"I've been a blind fool in more ways than one, Ruth," he burst out. "Falling for a feather-brained flirt like the one that played me for a sucker. When all my life you've meant so much to me."

She colored. "Buck? Do you mean you're actually telling me you like me. After all these years?"

"Like you?" he said, and swallowed hard. "That don't begin to describe it, Ruth. How I could have been near you for so long without realizin' how much I cared is—"

She moved up close, ran her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You don't really believe I'd have let that blonde hussy take you away from me, do you?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Fire Sears a Cowman

RUTH WEBB rode at his side when Buck pulled out of the canyon after dark. They crossed the benches, heading

toward the tiny window lights that marked the sheep headquarters on the flats below.

Buck left Ruth at a distance with the horses. She kissed him fiercely, and for a moment almost refused to let him go. Then she stepped back, and went silent.

Buck circled the sheep ranch on foot. He could hear herders in the bunkhouse. There were lighted rooms in the low, sprawling main house. Ranchhands were moving about the yard, and he caught snatches of their talk as he hugged the shadows back of a shearing shed. They were still talking about Lute Nichol's death. He gathered that Lute's body had been brought in, and that the funeral had been held at sundown.

The light went out in the cookhouse lean-to at the back of the main house. The cook came out, and headed for his sleeping quarters in another building.

Buck believed that Gar Nichols was in the ranchhouse. Awaiting his chance, he reached the door of the kitchen. He stepped into darkness inside. Crossing an inner room in the ranchhouse, which was dark and unoccupied, he moved silently to the opposite door. Light cracked beneath the portal, and he judged that beyond it was the main living room.

He heard the gurgle of a whiskey bottle, but the silence otherwise suggested that there was only one person in the room. He squeezed the latch slowly, and opened the door.

The main room was big and low, with cedar beams, festooned with cobwebs. Saddles, spurs and range gear crowded the walls, and the bare floor was scarred and splintered and blackened by the cast-off cigarette stubs of many years. It was a disorderly room, that only men had occupied.

Sitting in a scuffed leather chair was Gar Nichols. He was staring into the fire, his heavy face flushed and moody, and he

*(Continued on page 124)*


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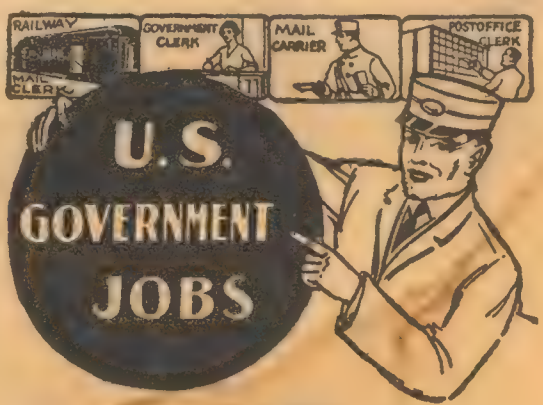


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*(Continued from page 123)*

was drinking whiskey neat, from a quart bottle.

He looked up as he heard the door creak. Then he came to his feet with a startled oath. "Damn you," he snarled. "So you've even got the gall to come here—right into this house?"

Buck held a cocked six-shooter in his hand. "Keep your voice down, Gar," he said thinly. "You know what happened to Lute today. He brought it on himself. Don't make the same mistake."

"What do you think you can pull on me?" Gar spat. "You ain't dealin' with Sul or Dude, or even Lute now. You can't make me crawl like some of 'em did."

"Have you got the deed handy to that strip of frontage I sold your dummy settler?" Buck asked.

Gar's heavy jaws widened in a mirthless grin. "So that's it," he sneered.

All the time Gar's eyes were on that cocked gun in Buck's hand. Gar's own six-shooter was hanging on a peg on the wall. He had unbuckled it, never dreaming that Buck would have the daring to come to the house to hunt him down. He was only waiting, praying for a chance to leap at Buck. He was willing to talk, stall for time, hoping for a break in his favor.

"I've got the money in my pocket that Harley Teal paid for that strip," Buck said. "I'll hand it back to you, Gar, when you deed that land back to some cow ranchers in the valley pool."

"I'll see you in hell first," Gar sneered.

There were inner bars on the two doors that served this room. Buck, keeping Gar covered, barred both entrances. He searched Gar for weapons, taking away a knife, and a pair of brass knuckles.

"You was aiming to have the edge if anybody asked you to show how good you were in a ruckus, wasn't you Gar?" Buck commented dryly. "An' just how good are you?"

"Git rid of that gun an' I'll show you," Gar breathed hopefully.

Buck walked to the mantel, tossed his gun on it. "Come on, Gar," he rasped.

GAR came at him like a ponderous, moving boulder. And he had the same inexorable strength. He wasn't as much of a fist fighter as he was a wrestler. He ploughed through the punches that Buck drove to his heavy face, and his thick arms closed around Buck's waist. He braced his feet, and then Buck felt the full, terrific power of the man's strength.

Buck tore an arm free, and ran his thumb into Gar's eye. It was that, or have his spine snapped by those crushing arms. Gar uttered a scream of fury, and his grip relaxed an instant. That was long enough for Buck, by a desperate effort, to wrench free. He retreated as Gar came lunging after him, and now he struck quick, chopping punches at the heavy man's face.

But Gar shook them off like raindrops. He rushed Buck against the center table. The table went over, and the lighted oil lamp crashed on the floor. Instantly there was a flare of flame and smoke as the spilled kerosene ignited.

Gar paid no attention. He was too intent on taking care of the man who had humiliated his brothers. He rushed at Buck, but Buck went low, diving, and came up beneath him, his arms around Gar's knees. He surged to his feet, and Gar went over his head. The big man hit the puncheon floor with a solid, jarring impact. He came to his feet unsteadily.

The smoky flames, from the burning pool of oil, licked at a bearskin rug, and climbed to an Indian blanket hung on a wall. Buck stepped in, driving his fists to Gar's jaw. The big man reeled again, and tried futilely to close with his opponent.

Gar suddenly became aware that the

*(Continued on page 126)*


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*(Continued from page 125)*

flames were spreading up the wall with fierce speed. He cast a startled look over his shoulder. "God!" he gasped, through puffed lips. "The place is burnin' up. We got to git out'n here."

Buck stepped in, and knocked him down again. The flames had taken savage root now. Heat and smoke filled the room. From outside came a hoarse, startled voice. "Fire!"

Men came to pound on the outer doors, but the heavy bars held them back.

Flames were licking along the beamed ceiling. Someone smashed a window, but a blast of heat drove them back. The ranchhouse was doomed. Gar Nichols felt the breath of the flames, could feel his shirt scorching, and his hair shriveling in the sudden furnace-like heat. He began fighting with demoniacal fury, seeking to reach the rear door which was now the only hope of escape from the room.

But Buck stood in front of the door, fighting him off with fists and boots. "How about selling that farm, Gar," he kept chanting. "Do you sell? Do you pull your flocks out of Trigger Valley?"

Buck could feel his flesh beginning to scorch. "We're b u r n i n g up," Gar screamed. "Let me out."

"We're stayin' here, until you cave, Gar," Buck yelled. "Both of us. This is your last chance."

"God!" Gar Nichols sobbed, as Buck shoved him away again. "You devil! I'll sell. That deed is in the bank in Three Forks. I'll turn it over to you. Anything —anything! Only let me out of here."

Gar was swaying, overcome by heat and smoke. And Buck was nearly out also, but he had the strength to open the rear door, and drag Gar Nichols through the house and out into the starlight, to safety. The ranch crew were forming a bucket line. They did not recognize Buck, for he was smoke-blackened, his eyebrows singed

off, his shirt in smouldering tatters. They took it for granted that he was one of their own number, who had rescued Gar.

Buck bent beside Gar, who was beginning to revive. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to sign that land back to me, Gar," he whispered. "Don't fail me. If you do, I'll come after you again. And I'll be a hell of a sight tougher the next time."

Gar Nichols had no defiance or fight left. He only looked at Buck with dull apathy. "You devil," he kept muttering.

Ruth Webb was waiting for Buck, as he slipped away from the glare of the burning ranch. She uttered a cry of dismay when she saw him. "Oh, my dear, what did they do to you? You've been burned."

"Only singed on the edges," Buck grinned. "It was Gar Nichols who really went through hell. He seemed to be afraid of a little heat. He promised to sell that creek frontage back to me, Ruth. I gave him a day to make good on his promise. I figure he'll keep it."

AND Gar Nichols did keep it. He was afraid to go back on his word. He had seen enough of Buck Coldiron's methods of fighting.

Three days later, the last of the Nichols sheep passed out of Trigger Valley, back to their own range. The woolies hadn't been in the valley long enough to do a great deal of damage, and cowmen quit thinking about abandoning their range.

The day that the last flock drifted over Bucktail Pass was the same day that Ruth Webb and Buck Coldiron were married. The wedding was held at Ruth's ranchhouse. Though her mother was present, standing up with her daughter at the ceremony, it was really the other three brand owners in Trigger Valley who gave away the bride, when the sky pilot asked the question. And their voices were emphatic as they answered in the affirmative.

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| 33x5 | 3.95 | 1.75 |
| 34x5 | 4.25 | 2.25 |
| 36x5 | 7.95 | 2.95 |
| 36x6 | 9.95 | 4.45 |

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

| Size | Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|
| 6.00-20 | $3.75 | $1.65 |
| 6.50-20 | 4.45 | 1.95 |
| 7.00-20 | 5.95 | 2.95 |

ALL OTHER SIZES

| Size | Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|
| 32x4½ | $3.45 | $1.45 |
| 34x4½ | 3.48 | 1.45 |
| 30x5 | 3.65 | 1.65 |
| 32x6 | 3.75 | 1.75 |
| 36x5 | 3.95 | 1.75 |
| 34x7 | $10.95 | $4.65 |
| 38x7 | 10.95 | 4.65 |
| 36x8 | 11.45 | 4.95 |
| 40x8 | 13.25 | 4.95 |
| 7.50-20 | $6.98 | $3.75 |
| 8.25-20 | 8.95 | 4.95 |
| 9.00-20 | 10.95 | 5.65 |
| 9.75-20 | 13.95 | 6.45 |

DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—

PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.
2328-30 S. Michigan Av., Dept. 1770-A, Chicago, Ill.

BOYS & GIRLS MEN & WOMEN You'll get $100.00

. . just complete the winning sentence in our 1939 Cash Prize "Get Acquainted" Contest. Also 191 other cash prizes which are given in addition to such presents as

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Why put up with years of needless discomfort and worry? Try a Brooks Automatic Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance permits the opening to close, yet holds reducible rupture securely, comfortably—day and night. Thousands report amazing results. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or stiff springs to chafe or gouge. Made for men, women and children. Durable, cheap, Sent on trial to prove it. Never sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and proof of results. All correspondence confidential.
BROOKS COMPANY, 458-B State St., Marshall, Mich.

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60 Day's Trial

*Let 1939 Bring You Mouth-Comfort!*

## FIT-RITE TEETH BY MAIL

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We stick to depression's lowest prices. If you have ever bought false teeth before, or if you find out what others have paid for theirs, you will be astounded when you see how little ours will cost you! By reading our catalog, you will learn how to save half or more on dental plates for yourself. Try "A-1" teeth at prices that people not blessed with money can afford to pay. Monthly payments possible.

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Make us prove you can't beat our fit, price, work or material. Wear our teeth on trial for as long as 60 days. Then, if you are not perfectly satisfied with them, they will not cost you a cent. But if you are delighted with the fit and your improved looks, tell your friends and relatives. We build our business on satisfied customers. We know no other way. And our business is steadily growing!

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No money need be risked. We guarantee that if you are not completely satisfied with any teeth we make for you; then, any time within 60 days, we will immediately refund every cent you have paid. We take your word.

*Try* FIT-RITE False Teeth

TO EAT WITH PLEASURE . . . TO LAUGH HEARTILY . . . TO LOOK YEARS YOUNGER . . . TO GUARD YOUR HEALTH . . . TO SPEAK DISTINCTLY . . . TO ENJOY LIFE!

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

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The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets, show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO

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